Nothing

Special

FICTION

VOL. 1 · NO. 1

TIRED OF ORDINARY THOUGHTS?

THEN SLIP ON THE AMAZING...

THOUGHT WOBBLER™

It gently shakes your head just enough to loosen the bolts of boredom!

THE WORLD'S ONLY PORTABLE MENTAL MASSAGER!

- ★ Stimulates Creativity!
- ★ Dislodges Stubborn Ideas!
- ★ Enhances Daydreams!
- ★ May Cause Mild Epiphanies!*

*Epiphanies not guaranteed. Results may vary. Do not use while operating heavy machinery, romance, or government.

ONLY **$19.95** ppd.

FREE TIN FOIL THOUGHT LINER WITH EVERY ORDER!

PERFECT FOR:

WRITERS!

SCIENTISTS!

ARTISTS! ARTISTS!

OFFICE WORKERS!

...AND ANYONE WHO CAN'T THINK OF A GOOD REASON NOT TO!

HERE'S WHAT SATISFIED WOBBLERS ARE SAYING!

"After just seven minutes, I wrote a poem about a toaster that runs away to join the circus. 10/10."

—Darlene P., Poet

"It's like a gentle handsbake from the cosmos."

—Dr. H. B. Quirk, *Theoretical Something*

"My boss asked me what I was wearing. I said, 'Progress.' Now I don't have a job, but I've never been happier."

—T. Jenkins, *Formerly in Accounting*

RUSH YOUR ORDER TODAY!

Don't wait! Your mind is already slipping away one boring moment at a time!

YES! I WANT A THOUGHT WOBBLER!

Enclosed is $19.95 (check or money order) for each THOUGHT WOBBLER 5000™.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Send to:
WOBBLER INDUSTRIES
Dept. NS-42
P.O. Box 2719
Nowhere, USA 00000

Please allow 4–6 weeks for delivery. Satisfaction questionable.

WOBBLER INDUSTRIES: MAKING MINDS MARGINALMENT BETTER SINCE 1957!

Nothing Special

Vol. 1, No. 1

Fall 2026

CONTENTS

TITLE	PAGE
Preface	4
Because It Was Loved	9
The Gathering	12
Do You Think I'm A Lunatic?	15
Liberty and Life	18
Rejected!	21
Vulia's Harp	24
The Corruption of Horus	27
Striking Silver (Part I)	48

Preface

Each of these stories began as either a passion project I knew was going to be short-lived (and, hence, should be extremely limited in scope), or as a sort of exercise in what I was thinking of as "pulp" fiction. The question of whether or not I've nailed the pulp style (or at least *a* pulp style) is unknown to me, but I do know writing them was a fun and, for me, unusual process. Prior to this I had finished two novels and had begun work on a trilogy, but by the time I got to this that had pretty much stalled. The work required for writing long books is not agreeable to me at this particular time in my life, and I found the kinds of short stories found here to be a sweet spot lengthwise. Reading some of the old pulp magazines like *Amazing Stories* and *Weird Fiction* gave me the sense that I should be writing stories closer in length to *The Corruption of Horus*, one of the stories you'll find here, but the attempt resulted in a more or less complete abandonment of writing altogether, which prompted me to throw what I got done of the last story, *Striking Silver*, into the mix in serialized form, and so the rest of that one will have to wait until subsequent numbers of this volume, if I ever get around to it.

I am reaching a point where writing will have to come when it comes, and a consistent and dedicated practice will have to be something that emerges organically. Now at the end of the latest eruption of material, I have collected everything here as a kind of snapshot of the literary moment. The trilogy is stalled, and I am busying myself more with immersion in the study of nature, technical and logical hobbies, and a little bit of music. There is one thing I'm working on that's engaging the storytelling component of my skillset, but that is not for here. Perhaps I'll integrate it in indirectly in the future, which would be necessary as it involves intellectual property I do not own the rights to, and this magazine is going to be offered at a price. Funnily enough, *Horus* actually began as that sort of thing, the result of a calculation that I'd better borrow concepts rather than extend a franchise considering the time and effort I was putting into it, and the possibility that it sells. Anyway, because I don't see myself writing for *Nothing Special* again any time soon, perhaps that borrowing strategy could help move that along, while also contributing to the other project, for which mostly the setting and premise are really borrowed, along with some other notable, minor elements, all of which can be omitted here.

If you can't tell, I came into writing this preface with absolutely no plan whatsoever, and am acutely aware that I may be rambling. Really just a stream of consciousness thing, I guess. I think I like it, though. When I would release albums, I would often like to write out a kind of preface at release explaining the process of writing and recording the records, what they meant to me. In a way, this is kind of the same thing, though I did very much go into writing most of these with the mentality that they should be read and forgotten, purely for entertainment. This was part of the freedom of the format, and it reminded me a little bit of my punk rock roots, where none of it was taken very seriously. That's the case here, and so I don't have much to say about the stories themselves, or how proud of them I am, or anything like that, but the surrounding context is nice enough to write about. To be honest, I'm really just trying to fill the damn page mostly, but every few sentences there's something I really want to say.

I have some ideas about where to take this, and am somewhat hopeful this gets some traction, at least internally. For now, we'll let this thing be what it is and leave it here. It is occurring to me that if these stories are going to be collected and presented together like this, then the publication likely needs an identity, or at least a

signature. Consultations with AI models suggested some kind of ecological or naturalist theme, and I think there may be something to that. You will read why, and will likely see more down the road. But now, I present to you: *Nothing Special.*

Nobody*

Because It Was Loved

Because It Was Loved

The *Avimaterra* docked with its characteristic flutter, and its occupants, the remnants of a persecuted civilization, sighed with collective relief. Well, it was not the civilization *itself* that was persecuted—we were more or less simply unconsidered collateral in a war, a predicament populations often found themselves inhabiting in this section of the Cosmos. To be sure, justifications were derived in order to frame us as somehow worthy of having our world destroyed, for those who might have cared. For those who held the power to make such decisions, such as the decision on whether a solar system should be allowed to continue existing, it was mostly not a question.

We had used to live on a plot of space-time that was particularly dense with vitality, what some called Life, and others vermin. So rich was it, that, despite our relatively humble stature inside the immediate network of civilizations, we were cherished and beloved by some of the more prominent, particularly an advanced and benevolent federation called the Redtidi. The Redtidi weren't interested in us so much as the totality of the phenomenon of our "neighborhood," its wild and magnificent beauty, and unique concentration and variety of organisms, a remarkable number of whom possessed some form or another of advanced cognition. This being so, and finding us in a relatively primitive, peaceful state, the Redtidi had long observed before penetrating our sector of the galaxy, and very cautiously proceeded to gift us with high technology which fell in line with our values and way of life.

Being generally non-interventionist, they at some point had become aware of our possible targeting by our assailants, and their enemy, the Crustoria, a hostile collection of peoples with strange, covetous ideologies about curation and cultivation of Cosmic "assets," but frankly did not possess enough interest in us or any of our kin to mount a defense on our behalf. That being so, the increasing threat was met with the means for us to protect ourselves, namely via an exodus at the last possible moment, one provision that the Redtidi *did* provide, though mostly indirectly. Considering that they also did not hold the conviction that the notion of our absorption into their broad community was something which was viable, we were forced to take refuge in another one which was nearby and friendly. While there is no formal alliance between this civilization, which shall remain unnamed, and the Redtidi, they do benefit from a more "active" protection due to their location along a high-value trade route which would constitute a major headache for the Redtidi if it ever fell under Crustorian control.

I stepped onto a massive ramp leading down to our host's orbital station, one of the first as an ambassador for my people, the Affa, though I didn't get too far before I turned off at one of the rest areas to look back at the colossal ship. It was magnificent, red with black spots along its body, and white toward the head. I would not be seeing it again, as the ark was a part of the deal we had made with our benefactors in exchange for refuge, and would soon be disassembled and stripped for parts after being flown down to the surface. Many more were on their way, some in temporary holding patterns on the edge of the solar system, as part of a rather lengthy transitional process. I soon felt the presence of some party approaching from behind me, and turned to face them.

"Welcome," they said, their words coming to me telepathically. "You are here on behalf of the Affa."

"Yes," I replied, also telepathically, "my name is Sentien."

They appeared confused, and I had to remind myself that they possessed a hive mind which did not recognize individuals,

though they respected species of other psychic constitutions.

"My apologies," I added, communicated more or less impressionally what I meant by the apology.

"Please follow us," they requested, and I continued on with them, down the great ramp toward the dock floor.

There was but little attempt at further communication, no attempt at bonding or lubricating the social moment, though after a time I felt a kind of "pull" to present memories and impressions of my home planet, a request which I answered obligingly. I recalled the dense flora which our species had made a home on, and had long been guided and engineered to better serve our needs. A thought came to mind of the vast cities of other civilizations, founded upon matter which had *never* lived, as a contrasting image to the towering networks of massive vines, trees, branches, flowers, and leaves, that had been our dwelling places. I thought vividly of the wonderful swirls of color we had always been surrounded by, and felt waves of both the profound love we'd had for our home, as well as an impossible sadness at having now lost it forever. Just then I felt a warmth in my core, a sort of presence, and knew that my escorts were expressing their sympathy and comfort thereby, for which I thanked them.

"We're just having trouble comprehending why the Crustoria would destroy our habitat and ecosystem if our planet was something they found valuable. It possesses unique properties that many in the Cosmos would kill for if they were able to… yet Crustoria can, and do, only to destroy it?" I said.

I felt an uncomfortable, evasive sensation emanating from my escorts, who then offered a reluctant explanation that I found surprising.

"The Crustorians have a strange quality to them that we think explains their behavior. Your home planet, and neighboring planets, were never targeted by them due to what was valuable therein, but for the love and adoration which the Redtidi had for your region. That love seems to have inspired a kind of spiteful malice in them, prompting them to destroy its source."

I recalled the terrible withering their attacks had caused to the vegetative structures which had nurtured us up out of the earth—but this vision was interrupted by a kind of internal smile, followed by a confusion on the part of our hosts. Already, we knew, the incredible resilience of life on our planet was asserting itself in our absence. While no longer hospitable to us, we knew that an answer was already well underway and was likely now beginning to make itself clear to Crustoria, announcing that it was not to be dominated. The hive implied further curiosity at this thought.

"Our best-kept secret is a strange phenomenon that exists in our region. According to the Redtidi, who told me when they visited our station some time ago, there is no other known location that possesses it. That is the rapid evolutionary response to threats which life in our and surrounding star systems seems to have to environmental threats."

I pictured the strange, gnarled—but *living*—growth I had witnessed beginning to grow out from under the decaying plant material, evidence of an already-mounting rebellion by what may as well be a conscious, intelligent life form. We were grown mild and peaceful, but our successors would most certainly be just the sort of thing capable of throwing off the hostility by the Crustorians. And they would come fast.

Our home planet, and the others whose ecosystems had been destroyed in the assault, were and would remain uninhabitable to what were now its former natives. But those ecosystems would rebound, tougher, with however much fight they needed to live on.

THE GATHERING

The Gathering

There they sat, motionless, their slimy, earth-toned skin glistening in the early morning light. Yesterday, there was one. Today, there were two. Their lack of movement, which I initially took as a 'freeze' response akin to that of a startled rabbit, did not give way to 'flight' when I myself had resumed movement. This time I took a harder, more aggressive step in their direction, but still no movement. They merely stared at me, definitely alive, as evidenced by movement in their throat, but refusing to budge.

Though somewhat baffled at the first one's stoic posture the previous morning, I had ultimately left the encounter with a sense of wonder and charm at the frog's simple beauty, as was the case with all of the wildlife I encountered on my morning walks along the creek. Even the giant ant nests that punctured the landscape this time of year, full of appropriately gigantic ants, whom I tended to regard with caution and anxious avoidance. Passing them, I was often haunted by visions of what their queens must be like, and had taken to imagining house-sized matriarchs dwelling deep below my feet. This always made me laugh, and shudder slightly, a response that these two frogs were now evoking in me. I went on my way, and assumed that perhaps they'd become habituated to the presence of humans.

The next day, when I encountered three, the sense of eeriness rose to a pitch that seemed disproportionate to the trigger, however strange it was. My rational brain stepping in to cool my inexplicable emotional state, I was then startled by the sound of crunching leaves behind me. I turned around to see a woman, stepping out of a thicket, who was now approaching me. Clutching my chest, I used my free hand to wave.

"Weird, aren't they?" she said, smiling apologetically.

I blinked, momentarily forgetting my prior objects of attention, toward which she nodded when I looked at her quizzically.

"Oh!" I said, laughing nervously, turning around to give the frogs another gander.

All three of them were turned in our direction, staring straight at us.

"Uh… yeah. Weird."

She laughed, walking past me and crouching, staring at them with patent fascination.

"I study them. This sort of behavior has been reported for some time now, though we still don't really have much of an idea as to why they're doing this."

I opted to continue standing, instead walking around to their right so as to get another good look at them, while also putting myself into her field of view.

"I was thinking habituation," I offered, scratching my head stupidly. Nothing but a dumb theory, based on what I didn't even know. The woman shook her head.

"No, this is unusual for any animal. Especially an amphibian, which might well be a prey animal to you as far as their genetics are concerned…"

She did not look away, but instead lowered herself onto her knees, examining them even more closely. I was sure she could have touched noses with one of them, and they still would not flee.

"Maybe some sort of chemical… or disease?" I asked.

The woman looked up at me, her moderately unkempt hair and the morning sunlight causing her to squint.

"Yeah," she said, nodding. "We have some theories."

She stood up and put her hands on her hips, looking back down at the frogs, who were now exclusively pointed in a semicircle toward her, and seemed to be looking up at her. She looked at me again.

"You interested?"

I choked, muttering something about my recent divorce, but that I *was* single.

"I meant in the frogs," she said, staring blankly at me. "You were looking at them."

"The… *frogs*. Right…" I said, wishing I'd left the house in a niqab.

The woman burst out laughing, hunching slightly in good humor.

"I'm just asking, because there's a volunteer citizen's observation program. As many eyes and minds as we can get on the project… it all helps. You can just… head down there and apply."

She smiled, and I smiled back. Then, she gestured for the phone in my hand, which I offered without thought.

"Here," she said, after some tapping, and she handed it back to me with a gallery pulled up through the browser.

It contained pictures of dozens of frogs surrounding a small pond, which looked more like one of those hot springs, but closer to… I looked back up at her. Her eyes, which I had not consciously noted, were a strikingly similar, brilliant honey-brown/green mixture, something I was struck with awe by, but that I did not mention. Looking back at the images, I was amused that some of the frogs, the few *in* the pond, wore foliage upon their backs which made them look like they were wearing robes, giving the impression of some kind of cultic ceremony taking place. The one nearest the center even seemed to be holding something, perhaps a stick, and I strained to make out what almost looked like writing on it…

"Like I said… weird," said the woman. "You should consider helping out! See if we can make anything of this together. I'll be around, so you can let me know if the idea sits well with you."

Soon she had left, and I resumed my morning walk. I did not see her on subsequent walks, though the number of frogs did steadily increase, a fact of which I took note. One day, approaching the spot where the sightings usually happened, I was astonished to find them finally *moving*… and not only that, but the count had absolutely exploded, and they were moving from an unseen point of origin, off the path and toward a known pond just out of view. I followed, practically hypnotized, to try and see where their path terminated, and was struck by the same scene I had seen in the image shown to me days before, though the pond was much bigger somehow, and there were a truly uncountable number of frogs surrounding it.

Incredibly, the deep layer blocking the waterfront parted as I approached, and I peered into what I thought must surely be not much more than a shallow puddle, but which felt like a deep, pseudo-psychedelic abyss of ecological proportion. As I gazed mindlessly, the frogs began to croak in unison, their noise ramping up quickly to a deafening level, until something popped up out of the water: two gigantic eyes, unmistakably amphibian, followed by a frog head a hundred, no, a *thousand* times bigger than its kin boiling up from what now most certainly must have been a deep watery chasm. So mesmerized was I, somehow completely taken in by the sight, and the strange beauty of it all, that I felt nothing but elation and wonder as her tongue sloshed out from out of her mouth, wrapped around me, and pulled me into my muddy grave.

Do You Think I'm a Lunatic?

Do You Think I'm A Lunatic?

Uriel zoomed past Jules and Martain on the bike path as they approached the outlet up ahead. Accelerating to catch up with him, they emerged onto the circular platform to see him eat it as he tried to fly up the six-pointed concrete medallion that occupied the center. He groaned, head popping up from the other side of it as he looked around to see where his bike landed, the other two stopping and shaking their heads at each other. Uriel raised his elbows, bloody and raw, his face adorned with a defiant grin.

"You're supposed to sit on that," said Néte, rolling up behind them as he took in the scene. "Not sacrifice yourself on it."

"City ain't gonna like those marks you left, either," said Martain, giving Uriel the kind of disapproving look his mother often gave him.

Uriel made a gargling sound, standing up and throwing himself down on the center of the star, raising his arms in mock-worship of the heavens.

"I GIVE MYSELF TO THE GOD OF TIERRA DE SATURNO!" he bellowed, before sitting up to examine the black markings his tires had made. "Gee, I don't know… pretty banged up myself. Think I could sue the city? Give Néte a nice pool of cash so he can tinker and make us some more toys?"

Néte unmounted his bike, engaged its kickstand, and walked over to Uriel's, examining the small rocket engine he'd crafted and mounted on its rear.

"No point in making them If you're going to *destroy* them before they're ever put to use," he said, frowning.

Uriel stood up, taking the handlebars from his friend and seating himself once more atop the seat.

"You sure about this?" Martain asked Jules quietly as they both stepped down from their own bikes, and Uriel launched into argument with Néte.

Jules didn't answer immediately, instead surveying the scene, then looking down at the rocket mounted to his bike frame.

"Néte seems pretty confident," he said at last. "Any how, don't want to let him down. He was excited to get us out here for a race, finally."

Martain nodded.

"Long as we don't max out the throttle," he said, thumbing a little knob next to the handbrake.

They moved forward a bit, stopping once they'd reached the star.

"So are we ready, or what?" asked Jules, prompting his two friends to stop and look at him.

"Uh, yeah…" said Néte excitedly, hopping back onto his bike. "The paths go out in four directions and circle back around here, to the center. Should be broad enough of a curvature to allow for pretty safe travel as long as you keep the throttle at a moderate level."

"Great," said Uriel, punching the ignition, firing up the engine with a loud roar.

Startled, the others reluctantly started their own engines. Jules's reluctance at the whole idea of racing on their new jet-powered bikes suddenly gave way to a sense of exhilaration as the thing vibrated with power, propelling him forward slightly until he reflexively engaged the brakes.

"TAKE YOUR POSITIONS," shouted Néte over the sound of the engines, and each of the four boys rolled over to their respective starting points. "REMEMBER, THESE THINGS CAN GO UP TO 70 MILES PER HOUR SO *DO NOT THROTTLEMAX* UNLESS YOU WANT TO REACH BIKE PATH ESCAPE VELOCITY AND SEE STARS!"

"DO YOU THINK I'M A LUNATIC?" yelled Uriel.

"YES!" the whole group yelled back in unison.

"ALRIGHT, THROTTLE UP!"

They each turned their dials slowly, the roar of the bikes becoming ever more deafening, until their brakes began struggling to hold them in place.

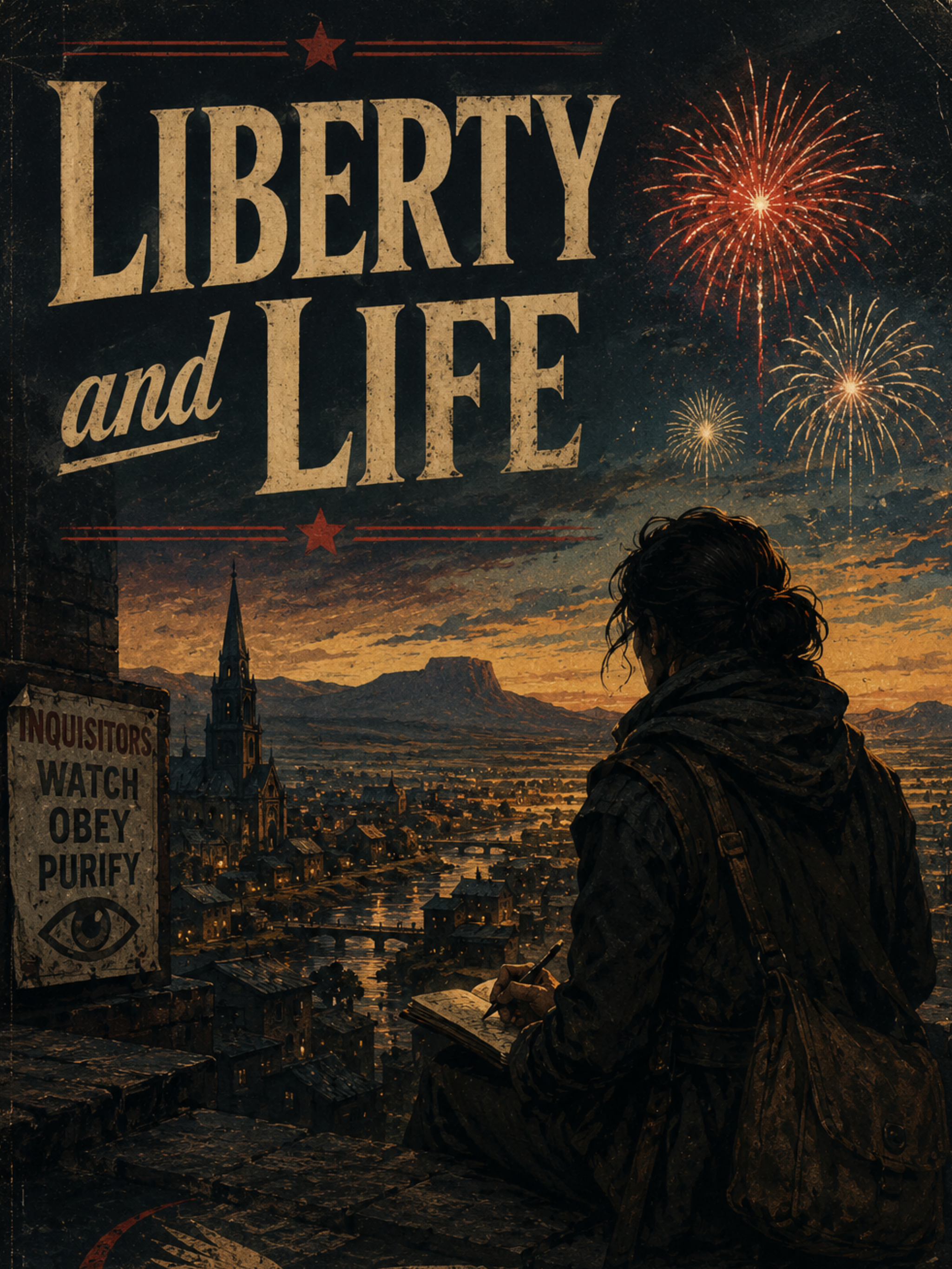
"READY… SET… GO!"

They shot off at once, all but Néte shocked at just how rapid an acceleration it was.

Uriel felt instantly in his element. As trees and benches and fountains flew past him, the itch to ignore Néte's warning began to gnaw at him, and before long he was already eyeing bringing the throttle up to the floor. Néte, meanwhile, was already beginning to push the thing past the limits of his own judgement, even as his rational mind recited it to him and pestered him at the danger of his behavior. Martain had held back, but had strategized on the notion of pushing it toward the end, betting that even if the others maxed out the throttle, they would surely chicken out pretty quickly once the reality of what that meant became apparent. Jules was the only one who fully intended for, and was maintaining, a moderate speed, partially because he wanted to see the satisfaction of his friends beating him—and each other—out, and partially because he trusted that Néte had given them good advice that should be followed.

Out of a side path an old woman walked out straight into his way, and he veered off just in time to miss her and the little dog she'd been walking, further cementing in Jules's mind faith in the choice he'd made. Cruising along, he began to wander in mind. He thought of how cool it was that the *Tierra De Saturno* park had bike paths that allowed for them to play out such a fun experiment, with their strange symmetry and geometric elegance that almost felt monumental, and gave him a subtle intimation of ceremony or ritual. It couldn't have been any more perfect, as far as he was concerned, though he did question the legality of riding these things in public, and especially in a park like this, where young kids and pets could potentially be at risk. Even so, he got to imagining how the designers might have created this layout specifically for him and his friends, and he felt immense gratitude that they were able to enjoy it. As he pondered this, an image flashed into his mind of his pet hamster, running on his wheel, navigating the tube network in his enclosure. He imagined him dividing into four, preparing for a race of their own on a round, plastic, central platform, seeing an aerial view of it with that same six-pointed star jutting out toward the sky.

LIBERTY *and* LIFE



Liberty and Life

July 1, 2056

Meeting someone in town today. Expected to pass through this place without any action, as we don't have any contacts here, but it seems some of the locals caught wind of our presence. Have it on good authority that they are legitimate. Can't be too careful. We are deep in Inquisitor territory. Anyway, I don't usually do in-person analyses, but my people insist it's the most efficient strategy for the situation. We'll be meeting a few times over the next few days. Should be able to get them what they need by the time we're ready to make our departure.

Things are getting worse further south. We have a lot of faith in the people there, and a lot of love, of course… but they seem to be cracking under the weight of economic pressures, and the fear our current political climate is fostering. Seems like we always end up circling back around to this sort of situation. I was lucky enough to grow up in a time where all that was receding. We grew up in a time of optimism, and self-empowerment. I don't know if we just got too comfortable, or what. Took it all for granted. People seem to be wanting to look to authorities to tell them how to live their lives, in practically every dimension. Completely antithetical to our values.

I suppose that is their right. Not going to take us with them.

July 2, 2056

Met with the contact. Worked through some personal details to tailor the bundle to them. The usual procedure… except… more intimate. Felt like it used to be, back before the paranoia and suspicion. When people were still normal. Was strange to experience that again after so long. I have all the confidence in the world about my abilities, but the detachment from the people I'm helping now seems like a real impediment. We never knew that they would shoot past our principles like that. We never wanted to disconnect the world. We wanted to champion independence. Now, they demonize technology.

Luckily for us, there never really is such a thing as disconnecting. Not entirely. It remains with us, in the spiritual principle of reality. We believe that that organizing, guiding force will bring us to where we need to be. Obviously, don't think it's here. Believe it's just a temporary block in that department, but I guess we'll see. Maybe the primitive way is the best way. I'm willing to accept that… just not the dogmatic, tribal aspect.

Still preparing for the bundle. Going to go out and collect later, out into the evening. Was supposed to go to dinner with Une, but duty calls. Can't take my responsibility lightly. There are many with my gifts, but there don't seem to be as many as bold or courageous. What Une calls me. I just think of myself as tenacious. Prefer not to think of myself.

Suppose I ought to get out there and get to work.

July 3, 2056

Delivered the bundle. Realized how much more relaxed I've gotten with collection generally. I always intend to give it the most thought and attention I can manage, but maybe the best measure of that is time. Focus. I spent practically the entire day yesterday on the process, and in doing so, I felt more connected to it than I have in a long time. Connected to Great Spirit. Our friend was elated when they saw what it contained… I haven't seen the response in a while either, but I can tell that it's been some time since my work created one like that. Has me in a bit of a reflective mood.

Une and I are set for that dinner tonight. We've gotten pretty good at blending in wherever we go, so it shouldn't be an issue. Of course, we mapped out the path we figured would be least likely to draw trouble, and despite being in the heart of our aggressor's territory, this town is uncharacteristically mild in their sentiments. Don't know how it's still standing, but that's how it is. For now. Contact did say things were getting worse. Well, with any luck, it won't be that way for long. Maybe we got to 'em just in time. The chances are that they will not detect our presence while we are still here… but they will feel us after we leave. That's how it is with what we do.

Luckily for them, contrary to what many of them believe, that is good news.

July 4, 2056

Dinner with Une was wonderful.

I feel the presence now of the contact, whom I will call Ren. Rev might be as appropriate, but I will call them Ren. I got word today of the immediate remedial effect of the bundle which I delivered to them, and I'm not sure I've ever felt so satisfied with a job well done. Tomorrow, we will be leaving this place, but it will be good to know that we left it in a better shape than we found it in. With our success, sometimes I wish I had a bit more friction to report… I know that's irrational, but it would certainly be a more exciting read. For anyone who might read this journal down the line. I suppose that our relatively balanced and sincere activity makes us less of a romantic target for our aggressors. As such, it's hard for them to make out of us what they wish, which I suppose would entail something like witchcraft and ritual sacrifice. Alas, it is what *they* do that is more along those lines than our own activity.

Also suppose I ought to acknowledge the 280th anniversary of American independence. Obviously it's not something that I tend to be optimistic about these days, but something in me still holds reverence for it. Perhaps it is something that is ours to appropriate. I think we are doing that well. Liberty and life.

I,
O

Rejected!

Rejected!

Boffor sat contemplating in his cave, skin glistening from a hunt. The oppressive humidity of the summer evening, thankfully, was offset by a cool breeze which was beginning to make him feel like he might start to lift off the ground. In the dirt, he drew a crude image of himself, some distance apart from a group of others, a reflection of the predicament he'd now found himself in. He was cursed with a terrible deformity, which, in fact, he did not think was actually so terrible, but one that his people had grown to regard as unbearably hideous. It had first become apparent very early in his youth—he was still a youth, not much older than sixteen years of age—and there had been some hope on the part of his community that he might grow out of it, grow into a form more pleasant to their superficial standards. That had not, however, turned out to be his fate. It was a matter unspoken, unexamined even by himself, though certainly *felt*, in the way such things often are, like a great leaden mass situated deep in the recess of his stomach. It was only through a slow, smoldering agony, when he'd at last found himself abandoned, even by those closest to his heart, even those who had proclaimed him closest to theirs.

Feeling a surge of indignation and anger, he stood and began walking the short way to Ruben's house, a humble property near the settlement where he grew up. Those people were different, even speaking an entirely different language, but he had observed them for many years in his solo expeditions into the forest as a child, his extended sojourns up into the trees, and picked up enough to eventually befriend Ruben, who was roughly his age. Their friendship had caught on fast, each learning the peculiarities and customs of the other, and by now were very tight, understanding each other very well. Approaching the clearing where Ruben's house stood, the red-orange colors of the sunset framing the trees beautifully, he was startled at a football which suddenly shot from out of that direction, just past his face, and collided with a loud *thud* behind him. Voices could be heard, presumably the voices of Ruben and his brothers, as they argued over who should retrieve the ball. He turned around and grabbed the football, examining it with amusement, before throwing it back out as he continued walking. The chatter fell silent, evidently confused as to who—or what—had done their work for them.

"Boo," he said, emerging out of the forest with a wide grin on his face.

Ruben frowned at him as his two brothers fell to the ground laughing, pointing at him and clutching their bellies.

"Wow, you really were spooked," one of them said, howling again, savoring every moment of his and the eldest's favorite pastime of trolling their little brother.

"Spooked?" asked Boffor, trying to sound both curious and sympathetic to Ruben's undefeated status of his family's most picked-on. "By what?"

The two brothers stood up, having had their fill, while the eldest chuckled, seeming in grave danger of doubling over once more, answered with another question.

"Yeah, tell him," he said, a wicked smile erupting from his lips, placing his hands on his hips.

Ruben was red as the tomatoes were, just behind him in the small family garden, perfectly ripe on the vine, and for a moment Boffor felt he was having trouble telling them apart.

"Stop," he said, well-practiced in the art of deflating all the fun out of his brother's teasing, "before I tell Mom and Dad about the moonshine you guys are secretly brewing."

The two brothers only laughed harder, one of them punching him on the shoulder as they walked back toward the house.

"We'll call out when dinner's ready," said the other. "Hey Boffor, you staying for grub?"

"Oh… uh," Boffor muttered, not wanting to intrude.

"Great," said the brother, turning with the other to go inside. "See you inside."

Boffor looked apologetically at Ruben, whose complexion now resembled the pale of the full moon, which had been visible all day.

Ruben shook his head, stopping midway as he noticed his friend's general demeanor.

"You alright?"

Boffor sighed.

"Yeah," he lied. "Just thought I'd come over and check in."

Ruben stared.

"Did they really do it?" he asked. "Did they really send you out all alone, like you said?"

Boffor held his tongue, but was clear that Ruben had already decided on what the matter was.

"Just stay here. We have room. I don't even understand what the issue is between you and your family… I mean, you look normal to me."

They sat down on a wooden swing on the back patio.

"I just… I don't want to explain it. My family just… they're just *different*, though you and I look the same. I guess maybe they're the weird ones, and we're normal. Obviously, to you guys, that's the case."

Ruben shrugged.

"Yeah… obviously," he said. "As obvious as it could be… anyway, don't worry. It's a new day. If you can't find acceptance with them, you've got it with us."

Boffor nodded, smiling slightly to himself.

"Hey, I noticed those tomatoes look about ready," he said, eager to steer the conversation in another direction.

Ruben looked over at them.

"I think you're right. Can you help me gather them and bring 'em inside?"

"Sure thing."

They stood and grabbed a couple of nearby baskets, beginning to snag each fruit one by one from the vines, when a loud *crack* was heard off in the distance, back toward the trees where Boffor had made his entrance —and his heart sank. Standing there, like a specter in the silvery moonlight, was his uncle, the only member of his family he thought might come to look for him.

"Holy shit," Ruben whispered, "you're seeing this right?"

Boffor could not read the expression on his uncle's face, but he reckoned it was one of sadness, of resignation at the fact that there was nothing meaningful he could do to help his nephew's plight. Seeming to accept that he'd better let him go, he turned around and re-entered the woods.

They were both silent for a moment, Boffor only turning to Ruben when he'd felt he'd mustered the courage to explain that that had been his uncle, and finding him wide-eyed with wonder and terror, a smile forming.

"Am I crazy?" he asked. "Did we just see *Bigfoot*?"

Vulia's Harp

Vulia's Harp

The blue-green waters of Vulia surged, glowing with energy and magic as it swept Mira along. Her heart seemed to flow along with it, all that she was dissolving in with the Great River, mother, life-giver. Moments before she'd been unable to believe her eyes, with its imposing serpentine form crashing around a bend, toward the spot where she had been bathing. Now the question of belief was a complete irrelevance. She had met, and known, the source of her village's fertility, their prosperity, and sustenance. So absorbed in bliss was she that it did not strike her as troubling that she was tumbling toward a fall —an indifference quickly proven to be well-founded as the Great River suddenly morphed into a Great Dragon, Her iridescent scales brilliantly shimmering as they reflected the sun-like moonlight.

Now she was high, above even the tall trees Mira had known all her life, granting her a perspective she'd never imagined, and was sure no one had ever seen quite like this. The air was cool up there, though she was still comfortable, despite her nakedness. She found herself overcome with awe and reverence, and she could refrain from expressing gratitude, from worshipping the benevolent entity who had given her this gift.

"Vulia," she cried, literal tears streaming down her face, partially from the wind, "Have I the requisite honor stored in my heart, and favor in yours, that you should allow me to witness such wonders? I mean not to question your judgement, only to express the impossibility of this thing, that I can be worthy."

The Great Dragon ducked, Mira's heart falling now with an assured confidence that only the birds, and Vulia, must have known.

"Vulia!" Mira cried again, "I fall before you, carrying the soul of my village in my very core, and on their behalf sink in total surrender. Must not our troubles be at their end? Must not your magnificent body remain strong in current, no longer withering and leaving our land hostile to life? Have our sacrifices been accepted, and your provisions come again to prosper us? Answer, oh Vulia, Great and Honored, and affirm this turn of fortune. I shall sink deeper into you, deeper into your warm embrace, your turquoise blood enveloping my own flesh as I burrow evermore toward your heart. May ours become one! Yes, I offer mine up if that is what shall please you. But what value is it next to yours, studded and bejeweled, of immeasurable value and splendor? Still, I offer."

Vulia rolled, and with her, Mira rolled… and as soon as she had turned, she had turned over again, her hot nostrils billowing with smoke, whiskers alight with sensation as she flowed down, down, making home again in the earth, widening her channels, bringing a radiant vitality to every place where she passed through. Mira's shining, silver eyes could see all in Her dominion, all that she made possible with Her glory and Her grace, Her nurturing and love.

Just then, a voice came from deep within.

"Our old ways are left to you. You need not call on us to bring prosperity to your people, but the responsibility is great. It must not fall into the wrong hands."

Mira awoke from her dream, so drenched in sweat that she initially wondered if she really *had* gotten into the river in the middle of the night. She sat up, noticing that her younger sister was also awake, and was also sitting up, looking at her. She made to speak, but then she felt something in her right hand. Opening it, she found what looked like a small slate made of stone, with strange symbols carved into it.

"What's that?" asked Kara.

Mira examined the object closely, trying to see if there was anything there which she

recognized. It didn't strike her immediately, but the more time she spent looking at it, the surer she was that it had something to do with the ancestral temples that dotted her village. She looked at Kara, who gazed back at her with curiosity.

"Come with me," she said, "quietly."

It was early dawn, and most of the village was still sleeping at this time, allowing them to slip on through undetected. Mira had a sense of knowing that, whatever this was, she was supposed to bring it to one of the temples on the perimeter of their territory. The question of *which* one exactly remained, but she quickly settled on a favorite of hers, one her father had brought her to when she was a little girl. Her fondness for the site drew her, and the sense of astonishment she felt to this day made it seem to her as good as any of the others they could visit.

She didn't know how she knew exactly that she was meant to deliver the thing, but as they approached, it seemed to acquire a kind of magnetic quality, pulling her almost imperceptibly toward the monument. It came into view, towering and triangular, the largest temple there was. Kara, who did not have the same fond memories of it, shrunk back visibly in fear, but Mira offered her free hand and gently pulled her into the ceremonial chamber behind the pyramid's steps.

"What are we doing here?" Kara asked as they approached the large stone monolith which jutted out from the ground, toward the back of the room, which the priests normally used for small animal sacrifices.

Mira did not speak, but held the small slab out to the indentation present on the monolith, that nobody had ever seemed to have noticed. It was a perfect fit. She looked at Kara, kneeled down, and answered her.

"Vulia came in a vision last night," she said, watching Kara's eyes grow wide with wonder. "This will end our struggles."

"You mean the river will grow strong again?"

Mira stood up and placed the slab into the slot, whereby a deep hum emanated out from the ground until it reached a level she was sure the rest of the villagers must have been able to hear. Almost immediately began a heavy rainfall, the heaviest she could remember, and she looked to find Kara smiling broadly at her.

THE CORRUPTION OF HORUS

Some nightmares are inherited.

The Corruption of Horus

I

Kass was nearing the end of her life.

Well, her old life anyway. She liked to add that sort of dramatic flair to the notion that she would soon be a mother, if only to cover for her terror surrounding it. She liked her freedom. Hell, she even liked being single, though it did concern her that her and the baby's father had separated almost immediately upon discovering the pregnancy, a decision she made on account of what she perceived to be an unreadiness on his part to take on the responsibility before them. The possibility of an abortion had occurred to her, but barely. It wasn't something she'd ever seriously considered, even after she found out she was pregnant. She was already mourning the loss of her freedom, and at such a young age as nineteen—but she would have the baby.

That was, if the dreams she'd been having turned out to be nothing. Dreams of somewhere downstream of time, her belly round to term, sitting in the passenger seat of her father's car. He'd go out for something, in the middle of the night, and she'd be sitting there. All the dread of the prospect of motherhood weighing on her like an anchor, promising to pull her down into an abyss of slavery, and a shattered future where she could've been and done anything. That's when she'd see it. The green man. She didn't have any vivid memories of what he looked like, or what he was wearing, or even his green-ness. It was just something she knew about the dream, that this man, who was green, would appear out in front of the windshield.

He would come in and take her child. It was another vague notion, this one of her baby somehow or another being taken from her body—and then she'd wake up relieved. Soon, she figured, that relief would turn to disappointment as she rubbed her belly and knew for certain that it was still there. For now, though, those dreams had an effect of clearing away all her fears for a few days. Not for long, as she was an ardent realist, and she knew that this baby had as good a chance as any to make it out of her accursed womb in due time. Still… it was a nice respite. Something she tried to augment with distractions whenever she could, until the inevitable forced its way in as an obvious, ever-present reality.

"You okay?" asked Hans, a young man from a little further north in Adelante, whom Kass had started to date. "You've been quiet."

"Huh?" said Kass absentmindedly, shaking the rumination from her skull. "Yeah… sorry. I guess those mushrooms have me in my head a little."

She gave him an apologetic smile as they continued on their hike along Grimwar Strait, now trying to find a good place they could camp out for the night.

"I'd have thought that you'd take 'em better than me," chuckled Hans. "You seem pretty experienced."

She wasn't *that* experienced. She'd taken up a number of relatively safe experiments with psychedelics and other experiences, but only really since she'd learned she was pregnant. Figured she'd might as well make up for some of the time and freedom she'd lose in being a mother by condensing as much as she could into the early stage of her pregnancy and, where appropriate, even into the late stage. This was what that was, really. The mushrooms, this strange boy that she hardly knew. She *was* interested in him, sure, but even she had to admit now that she felt a little foolish going alone on a hiking/camping trip with somebody she was so unfamiliar with.

Maybe he's my green man, she thought to herself diabolically, feeling sorry at the thought as soon as she had it, although she wasn't entirely sure what it meant. Would she like him to kill her? Perform an impromptu abortion out here in the hills? Induce a miscarriage somehow?

"I think even after many years, trippers can still have some pretty profound experiences," said Kass. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good," said Hans, smiling. "Everything has mostly just seemed a thousand times more beautiful since the trip started."

He looked calm. Kass sort of envied him, as she had spent much of her own trip in her head, worrying about the coming months.

"How about you?" he asked, seeming to notice. "You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I promise. How about this place? You think this is a good spot to set up for the evening?"

She gestured to their left, just before a large bit of hilly terrain, where there was something of a clearing.

"Could be a useful buffer for the wind, if that picks up."

Hans nodded, and they walked over, offloading their gear and setting up the small tent they'd packed for the weekend. They finished and settled in a little, setting up some supplies and making small talk as they did.

"So what's it like growing up in Adelante?" asked Kass as they sat in one of the camping chairs they'd brought with them.

"Quiet," said Hans. "Boring. There really isn't much to say about it at all… doesn't even have a zip code. How about Halamar?"

Kass thought for a little while. She'd never been to Adelante, but she'd heard a fair bit about it. From what people had told her, there was a distinctive contrast to her own hometown, but it wasn't that major. Halamar was larger, with a larger accompanying population, but it was still pretty mellow and uneventful.

"Same, pretty much," said Kass, flatly.

Hans gave her a look of amusement.

"Well, at least you guys have the bay. We pretty much have to go through your territory to get to it."

Kass gave him her closest approximation to the opposite of amusement she could imagine, which she figured was something like horror or disgust.

"Are you suggesting we should feel grateful to have that creepy old *bay* in our backyard?" she asked him. "I suppose it's nice if you didn't grow up with it nearby, but it's pretty boring as far as I'm concerned."

"Is it creepy or boring?" Hans asked, grinning.

"Both. There's lots of folklore associated with it, most of it pretty dark."

"Dark? Like what? Tell me a story."

"Well," started Kass, thinking for a moment, before an idea came to her. "Oh! Well… there's an urban legend about the bay… the Leviathan. It's supposed to be some sort of monster that made a home there, and it takes people sometimes."

"Leviathan," said Hans, almost as a statement. "Sounds like a story to keep kids away from the water."

"I think that's exactly what it is," said Kass, smirking. "That's mostly where you hear that sort of thing."

She paused momentarily, another thought occurring to her, this one actually triggering a sensation of dread in the pit of her stomach.

"There's… this other one. It's associated with an old abandoned resort, sort of just around the bend here."

Hans looked up at her, pausing in the process of unwrapping a granola bar. Kass continued.

"It's technically not *our* bay, but it is obviously connected. The resort's on the far shore of Tate Bay up ahead."

Hans finished unwrapping his food, and began chewing slowly, speaking through it.

"What's the story with that place?"

"Kinda the same thing, but I've heard adults whisper about it to each other all my life. That's not one they really tell the kids. They take on a pretty ominous tone when discussing it."

"So people have gone missing there?"

Kass nodded.

"I mean, it really feels a lot more like an urban legend than anything… but the rumor is that there was a secret mental institution hidden underneath, and that people would be taken for experimentation. Mostly teenagers."

Hans laughed.

"Well, it sounds like maybe that's what it's for. To keep curious, rebellious teens from snooping around the ruins. Maybe it's dangerous."

Kass smiled, the kind of mischievous, borderline evil smile she reserved for when she was about to say something she knew she shouldn't.

"Wanna go and find out?"

Hans' smile faded and his eyes widened again, more in a playful manner, although Kass thought she detected a hint of real anxiety behind the display.

"Are you serious? Now?"

"Yeah," said Kass, standing up abruptly as if the decision had already been made. "There's still plenty of daylight. We can leave our camp here and bring the flashlights for the way back."

"Kass, I don't know about this," said Hans, standing up slowly. "Set and setting and all… what if it freaks us out? We're still on the tail end of a mushroom trip. Could it be dangerous?"

"Are you afraid of that, or of what we might find when we get there?" asked Kass, putting her hands on her hips.

Hans raised his hands in a shrugging gesture.

"Well, I mean… I don't know, how long has that place been abandoned? Couldn't be much going on there now, even if the legend is true. I'm just saying, maybe it carries some bad energy."

Kass now took on her well-rehearsed pleading routine, forgoing the strategy of trying to dare him, based on her intuition that it wasn't necessary to challenge his ego.

"Come *on,* Hans," she said, shrinking slightly, giving him a little bit of a pouting act. "Didn't we come out here for adventure? To get away from our boring little towns and look for some excitement? Or wonder? Even if it is scary, that's part of life too. It can't all be peace and beauty… part of the value of a psychedelic trip is acknowledging the dark side of life too."

Hans looked at her, hesitatingly, but she could see that logically he was already convinced, even if he wasn't emotionally. She held the pleading act in place, the cherry on top to a cake that she knew was ready to carve up and eat.

"Okay," said Hans, sighing in endearing exasperation, while Kass squealed with delight.

⚓ ⚓ ⚓

It seemed as if the sun had begun to race them down to their destination, as they were surprised by the time they'd arrived how dark it had gotten, and in seemingly such a short time. The sunset behind the relatively quaint abandoned complex of buildings cast them into a striking, contrasting darkness, almost as if to warn them that something hidden behind needed attention, challenging the superficial sweep they intended to do. Now it was Kass' turn, having been prompted along these lines of thought at the sight, to tremble at the notion that perhaps there was more to the legend than she'd ever really allowed herself to believe. Hans, though, seemed somehow calmed as the place came clearly into view.

"I can see why they put a resort here," he said, seeming to dip back into his fading psychedelic frame of mind from earlier.

Kass could see what he meant. The hills ascended up behind the site, into what she believed was some sort of wildlife preserve. There weren't that many places around the area with rolling green hills such as these, as most of the region consisted of wetlands as far as the terrain went. It was admittedly a beautiful shift in scenery when one took the time to appreciate it.

"Yeah," she mumbled, glancing over at the string of docks which lined the shore, which harbored a number of old rusted boats. "Well… should we look around? Probably a good idea to get to it with the little remaining daylight we have."

Hans nodded, and they headed for the big central building, which read *Bluebird Bayside Resort.* The wind had been steadily picking up over the past few hours, now having reached a good, steady, strong rhythm, and the whole damn building seemed to groan in response. Kass wondered if it was safe to even be exploring it, thinking back to what Hans had said earlier and noting the copper-colored stains present across its face. She wasn't sure exactly old they were, but they sure seemed run down.

"What are we thinking?" asked Hans as they entered through the small, unlocked door in front.

The interior was dark and cluttered, with a receptionist desk being the most prominent element, and most other features fading into shadow. The soft-pink sunset shone gently through the skylight above them, and they moved cautiously through to a hallway to their right.

"Kind of neat," said Kass, pulling out her flashlight and clicking it on.

"Yeah, it is kind of neat," agreed Hans, doing the same. "I think I'll listen to you from now on."

Kass looked at him.

"You mean it took you this long to figure that out?" she asked sarcastically, grinning at him as they made their way down the hall.

"I mean, it didn't seem like a good idea when you…"

He froze, perking his head up as if he'd heard something.

"What?" Kass asked, but Hans shushed her.

He stayed frozen in place for a few seconds, and then whispered back.

"You didn't hear that?"

Kass couldn't tell if he was trying to mess with her or not, though he seemed convincingly sincere.

"Hans, I don't…"

A rustling from somewhere, echoing from further down the hall, almost seeming to come from below them. Then, what sounded like a muffled voice, kind of like a groan, but not entirely discernible.

"There!" said Hans, looking toward where the noise had come from.

Kass felt that feeling of anxiety return. She was all for adventures and exploration, but the idea of discovering that the nightmarish stories about this place were true —and still relevant—was more than she bargained for.

"Hans, I don't like this," said Kass. "If there's someone here, they can't be up to any good, can they? Look at this place. Not exactly the kind of joint you'd expect to find good company in. Not now."

Hans moved toward the sound, leaving Kass unsure as to whether or not he had really heard her.

"*Hans*," said Kass, her gut telling her that they needed to leave immediately.

"Let's look," he responded in a hushed voice. "Just be quiet, okay? I didn't like the sound of that. Feels like someone waking up or something… like, maybe they've been beaten over the head or drugged?"

He moved still further forward, toward a door with a little hole in the upper midsection, which had bars in it.

"Maybe we could find someone, send them out to investigate," said Kass, but she could already tell that Hans' curiosity and concern were not going to be overturned until he got to the bottom of it.

Why do men have to be so god damn bold? she thought, making a mental note not to suggest they go somewhere there might be trouble next time.

A heavy steel door with faded red and white stripes painted on it stood ajar on the right side of the room they'd entered, seeming to be some kind of waiting area, which Hans led her to. Dim lights lined the stairwell found there, descending past the point they could see from where they stood.

"Someone must be here," said Hans, giving Kass an uneasy look.

"I agree. I think that means we should *go*," she returned, trying her hand at convincing him to turn around one last time.

No luck. Hans began tiptoeing down the stairs, with Kass keeping close behind. It wasn't long before they were on some sort of rusted old metal platform, with railing lining the edge and another stairwell. They both froze for a second, realizing they had no idea what was below them, nor how sturdy or quiet the platform was going to be. Kass thought that, given the noise they'd heard was audible all the way up from the top level, whatever—or whoever—had made it couldn't be too far down. Suddenly there it was again, a rustling sound, this time no accompanying moaning, if that had indeed been what they'd heard.

Together they crept up toward the railing, minding some shelves which were overflowing with lightly rusted metal tools, and peered over. Kass could have sworn her stomach sank all the way through to the other side of the Earth at what she saw. Down below, merely a floor down, was a man wearing a battered old fisherman's smock and an old leather rain hat. The sight of him was frightening enough in itself, but it was the revelation of what was before him that truly horrified her. A rolling table on which was splayed a man, wide eyes staring up at them, frozen in horror and seeming to silently but desperately plead for help that potentially had been only moments too late. Then, Kass' stomach turned at the realization of what the man was actually *doing* with the corpse.

"*Is he… is he cutting him up?*" whispered Hans, his voice less suggestive of what must've been his own feelings of horror, and more of someone who was absolutely unable to emotionally process what he was seeing.

"Hans," Kass whispered back, but she was interrupted by the dreadful sound made as Hans' jacket caught a tool jutting from one of the boxes which contained them, sending it crashing to the ground.

They both peered over the railing again, just enough to try and catch a glimpse, but the man strangely seemed to be looking around on his own floor for the source of the commotion. He did not seem particularly disturbed, nor did he move in an erratic fashion, but calmly walked around the level, almost as if he were looking for a lost item, leaving the body to gush a thick stream of blood from the incision the man had just made in its torso. Kass wanted to scream to Hans that they should run, but for some reason all she could do was stand and watch him, like she did in her dreams. The ones with the green man. The one who took her child. In the dreams, she seemed to be rather far along, with a large belly, as opposed to now where the pregnancy was only subtly perceptible, mostly by her. For once a feeling of relief washed over her at the fact that she was only eleven weeks pregnant, considering that this man now very much took the place in her mind regarding that figure, if only for the reason that he might not wish to lay hands on *her* this way.

Kass' attention snapped back into focus, leaving the absolutely insane dreamlike state, given the circumstances, she'd just been occupying.

Why did the notion of this figure seem to lull her into a state of pliability, complacency, and even outright submission?

All passed before their eyes in a matter of mere moments, and the man was now seeming to look in their direction, but still down on his level. After a moment in that orientation, he stood up as if satisfied. Kass held her breath, hoping that the man would go back to what he'd been doing so that perhaps they'd have a chance to make a silent exit. She was praying for the outcome silently to herself when the man, as if he'd known where to look all along and had merely been toying with them, looked right up at them. Kass was surprised, but again strangely pacified at noticing that the man's complexion seemed to be very pale, almost blue—almost green.

"Run," said Hans, a prompt which immediately put her fight-or-flight instincts into motion, and she booked it up the stairs with Hans following close behind.

Neither of them looked back to see if they were being followed, although Kass did instinctively try and listen for any indication of a third set of footsteps, though she didn't think she could hear them. It wasn't a long run back up, through the lobby and out the front door. They ran back toward the trail which would lead them back around to their campsite, and darkness had fallen, prompting them to use their flashlights, but they hadn't made it very far along at all when Hans suddenly stopped her and put a finger to his lips. In the distance, toward the far end of the harbor where a rather large, arching bit of old metal sat, the sound of what Kass thought must've been a small motorized boat roared to life.

"He's going to try and follow us along the trail," said Hans.

"What do we do?" asked Kass.

The trail was narrow, with somewhat steep hills to their right and the bay to their left. Hans looked at the hills.

"There. We make our way up those, and fast."

"I don't know Hans, it seems dangerous," said Kass, glancing uneasily at the hills, which towered dark and menacing above them in the moonlight.

"We don't have a choice, Kass. Use your flashlight. Try to watch your step. Don't stop until we get over to the other side. We should be able to find camp pretty easily from there."

Kass nodded, and they began running as fast as they could up the hills, which proved to be considerably easier than she'd initially anticipated. The boat seemed to roar into action, its noise starting to get louder as it exited the tunnel. Toward the top of the hill, the climb began to tire as the prolonged stress of trying to run up it wore them out. It didn't take very long though, and with Hans signaling for her to mute her flashlight as the boat closed in on their side of the bay's shore, and soon they were catching their breath on the other side.

Not stopping long, they then began to carefully make their way down, taking a diagonal route in an effort to try and reach their camp faster. Approaching the bottom, they came upon a field of fairly small rocks, which slowed them down a little as they navigated the remainder of their descent. Suddenly Hans wailed in pain.

"*Ahhh!*" he exclaimed, sending waves of alarm through Kass' body.

"What?" asked Kass, moving closer to him to see what was going on.

"*Damnit*. I think I may have sprained my ankle."

"Which one?"

Hans pointed his flashlight at his right foot, where he was caressing the injured part.

"Put your arm around me," said Kass, and Hans immediately did so, both of them still feeling the urgency of getting away from the obvious murderer that was chasing them.

"How bad do you think it is?"

Hans winced as he hopped along on one leg, straining slightly because Kass was rushing him, trying to push him past his comfort zone and try to make up for any time they could in a now significantly slower escape plan.

"It's fine. Let's just… *agh*… let's just get back to camp."

They moved in silence for a while, and as the adrenaline began to wear off somewhat, Kass felt compelled to discuss what they'd seen.

"What… what happened down there. What did we stumble on?"

"A murder," said Hans through labored breath. "Possibly a dinner preparation."

"*What,*" said Kass, not so much a question as an expression of disbelief. "You don't really think he was gonna *eat* that thing… that *man*…"

"Uncle's a butcher," said Hans morbidly. "That looked a lot like a prep table for meat carving and storage. Even some of the same sorts of knives and cleavers."

Kass hadn't noticed that. She hadn't noticed much beyond the two men, one green and one blue. The thought of the one eating the other repulsed her to her core.

"So you're telling me we're being pursued by some psycho cannibal?"

"I'm not telling you anything except what it looked like to me," said Hans, redoubling his efforts to keep up the pace. "Maybe we found Halamar's Leviathan."

II

Kass and Hans approached their tent, more or less flinging themselves into it—careful to mind Hans' injury—and hiding in silence for signs that they'd been followed there. It wasn't a long trip out of Tate Bay to their campsite, which was located perhaps two or three hundred feet away from the strait. Hans nursed his sprained ankle tenderly, muttering something about a first aid kit.

"I didn't bring anything, no," whispered Kass, recalling her father's warnings about going out without one.

Should know better by now than not to listen to him… she thought bitterly to herself, silently promising she'd at least consider his words of caution going forward.

"Ah, it's fine," said Hans. "Say, do you think there are any rangers out here? Should be right? This area is all designated for hikers and campers and whatnot."

"The trail loops around a little further back… I think there is a ranger outpost there. I can go and…"

She trailed off as the sound of a motor emerged into her awareness. Looking at each other, horrified, they both turned their flashlights off and waited with racing hearts as the sound grew nearer and nearer, until finally…

"*It's right outside,*" Kass cried silently to herself, her sense of despair skyrocketing as she tried to sink deeper into her sleeping bag.

The sound of the motor went silent, just at the water's edge. A new, more ominous and threatening sound of silence filled their tent for what seemed like forever, until a new sound: footsteps. Right behind their tent. They seemed to indicate that whoever it was —Kass imagined the man from the resort— was simply walking around, having a look at the campsite. They did not seem to have a light of any kind, though the moon was full and bright, unusually bright, undoubtedly providing enough to see. The footsteps then began to move around to the front of the tent, and soon they could see the shadow of a man. When he got to the tent opening, he simply stopped and stood there.

They both held their breath, frozen in fear, terrified at what might come next… but nothing came. The man simply continued to stand there. He stood there so long that, after a time, it began to make Kass angry. Her anger only intensified the longer it went on,

and soon all the fear she felt was entirely overshadowed by it. She sat up abruptly, seeing Hans' head swivel in her direction.

"Kill us if you want, but you're not going to toy with us," she said, and she jumped up, tearing the tent open to face whoever was out there.

It was a ranger. He smiled at her, perhaps the most unsettling part of the whole encounter so far.

"What are you doing?" asked Kass, her emotions torn between absolute heavenly relief at seeing *him*, and uneasiness at the strangeness of his behavior outside the tent.

"Just thought I'd check up on you folks," he said in an over-sweet tone. "You seemed a little bit spooked."

"My… my boyfriend hurt his ankle… why were you walking around our tent like that?"

The ranger smiled again, but this time there was something else in his eyes. He leaned around her to get a glimpse of Hans, like someone looking around to make sure nobody was about to witness them steal something.

"Oh, that's just protocol, dear. Just makin' sure you two ain't up to no good. Now… your friend's ankle. Broken, you say?"

"Sprained," groaned Hans.

"Sprained," said the man, gritting his teeth, his eyes narrowing. "I'm sure I can do something about that. Just get back in there and have your friend come out, and we can take a look at the damage."

Kass's hand wrapped her fingers around the handle of a small blade she kept holstered at her waist. Everything in her gut told her that something was off here… but she noticed another sensation. The awareness that this definitely wasn't the man they'd seen in the old resort. Even if he'd changed his clothes, even if the lighting was obscuring the strange blue-green complexion she thought she'd witnessed down there… she knew with certainty this wasn't him.

All kinds of psychos running around here tonight.

"Hurry up now," the man said, but Kass shook her head.

"He needs transportation. If you can go back and get that for him…"

The man's demeanor changed in an instant. His eyes went cold, the veneer of pleasantry vanishing like breath vapor mid-winter.

"I'm not going to tell you again. Get back into the tent and *send* that boy out here. *Now*."

Her hand wrapped tighter around her knife, as she prepared herself to yank it out. Then something else happened. Kass saw a figure drop behind the man from above, a large, shadowy blur, landing with a heavy *thud*. Then a thick, loud, wet sound, accompanied by a cascade of dripping. The man's eyes went wide with shock. Kass's first thought was that he must've urinated himself until she looked down: three large prongs stuck out of his torso, glistening and black as night, before going back the way they came, leaving three massive holes gushing with blood. Before Kass could react, he disappeared, lifting up vertically into the air and leaving them once again in silence.

Silence.

"What the hell was that?!" shouted Hans.

"*Shhh!*" Kass answered, looking out the tent above her.

Nothing but a starry night with a bright, silver moon overhead.

"We need to stay put and stay quiet."

Hans forced himself to his feet.

"We need to *leave* now," said Hans, gathering a few belongings from the tent floor, making his way toward her.

"Are you crazy? He can't have gone far."

"He could be on the moon for all we know! All we know is he ain't here, and that means it's time to move."

Hans pushed past her, taking his own look around.

"I mean, what the *fuck*?" he yelled.

"Language," said Kass, an old habit passed down from her father. "And *lower your voice*."

"Are you coming?"

Kass realized she was still somewhat in shock from what she'd just witnessed, scrambling to collect some things of her own, opting to leave most of the camping supplies behind. She followed Hans and they began to walk toward the trail. As they approached the water's edge, they saw a small, shoddy old fishing boat.

"Is that…" started Hans, trailing off as they stared ahead.

"Let's go," said Kass, beginning to pull Hans back the way they'd come from earlier in the day, but he resisted.

"What if there's someone else in there?" asked Hans, looking nervously at the vessel. "We should check it out."

"What if he's hiding in there?"

"Did you see him heading in this direction?"

Kass flung her hands up in the air.

"I don't know where the hell he went… he just… vanished."

"It's the right thing to do. We'll pull them out, hide them in some bushes or something if we have to until we get some help out here."

Kass knew he was right, and she led the way, leading Hans carefully over the boat. It was relatively small, with room for perhaps three or four people, and appeared as though it could withstand seafaring. They approached the lower rear end, but found that it was still a little bit too high and there was a bit too much space to get a good look, leading Hans to hop over the railing and onto the slim bit of land left seaside.

"Hans, don't do that," said Kass.

Hans didn't answer, instead groaning in pain at his ankles, before attempting to peer on tiptoe into the boat.

"God damn thing's made to be docked," he said, and then he did something which astonished and terrified Kass. Without warning, he leaped up onto the short side of the thing, grabbing its edge as tightly as possible, and lifted himself up by his arms to get a look.

"What the hell, Hans?!" demanded Kass, looking around nervously for their assailant. "This guy could be back any minute now."

Again Hans didn't answer, instead *leaning over all the way into the boat* until he fell in.

"*Hans*!"

"I'm okay," said Hans, groaning.

"You're gonna break your other ankle just trying to get out of there."

"I don't see anyone," said Hans, now up and looking around. "But there's… there's blood. A lot of blood…"

He seemed to be following a trail toward the back end, leaning over the very back which was quite low.

"Fresh blood," he said quietly. "Kass, we need to get out of…"

The water broke, and Hans screamed as something emerged from out of it, just under where he was, and dragged him under.

⚓⚓⚓

"So you're saying three people are dead?"

Kass felt as if she had recounted her story over and over a million times to the local Halamar sheriff, as well as others at the Halamar Police HQ. Still, she didn't feel as if the man didn't believe her so much as he wanted to make sure he had the story as straight as possible.

"Yes," Kass said quietly, in stark contrast to the hysterical state that she'd arrived in.

She had run most of the way there, tearing off when Hans didn't come up from out of the water, and she'd been absolutely exhausted once she'd come into town. She'd spoken to her father, who was on his way, and

he'd sounded worried sick when she described the night's events. It must've been past midnight, though she never did check, feeling as though the solidity of time would somehow cast the whole experience into reality instead of the realm of nightmare where she'd rather keep it.

"Okay," said sheriff Artaud, setting his notepad and pen down, and mulling something over in his head. "Okay. Excuse me for a second."

He walked out, leaving Kass to her own thoughts. She was relieved to be back in town, of course, but she could not shake the images of what she'd seen from her mind. There was a strange feeling looming in the back of her mind that it didn't matter where she was, how deep within society she hid, it would never be safe. Perhaps it was the perceived connection with her dreams, giving her a sense of being 'haunted' by this man—or thing. Maybe it was all in her head, and what she'd experienced was a simple madman, with no connection to her in any way other than the fact that they'd happened to cross paths. Maybe, in a few hours, they'd bring him in in handcuffs, or better yet, in a body bag.

The sheriff came in again, looking at her uneasily. He walked back over to his desk, where Kass was sitting, and sat down once more.

"Alright… so the issue I'm having with your testimony… You said that ranger just disappeared? Are you sure there was nowhere they could have hidden?"

Kass simply shook her head. She was getting tired of the questions.

"Okay, okay… Now… you said this man came *out of the water*?"

He looked intently at her, not with an air of doubt, but one a person might allocate to a puzzle or a riddle.

Kass took a long breath.

"That boat wasn't there when we'd passed that spot earlier. I think he drove it there from the old resort, but… but he wasn't in it when he attacked Hans."

The sheriff nodded.

"I see. Seems awfully inconvenient a strategy to catch someone by surprise, but…"

He leaned forward and lowered his voice.

"Between you and me, there's already talk about this… *Leviathan* thing going around. Now, if that's getting folks riled up here, we can be certain it's going to do it for the town. All kinds of superstition making a mess of people's heads here…"

He sat back again.

"If you don't mind… I know you're probably tired of the questioning, but if I could, I'd like to take you down to see Dr. Pan."

"Dr. P… you mean Henry Pan?" asked Kass, tilting her head.

"Yeah. This debacle will probably get pretty out of hand in the papers, but seeing as he and his organization are the sole proprietors of Halamar's television and radio output… well, I think he'll best know how to proceed."

He gave Kass a guilty look. Everyone in the town knew that Sheriff Artaud and Dr. Pan didn't exactly see eye to eye—in fact, Artaud couldn't stand the way Pan Health Sciences had come to exercise such control over Halamar's media, although he didn't have much say in it. The federal government felt that the region was critical for maintaining order in the geopolitical climate of the last few decades, and much of their funding had been made conditional on the local government allowing central control over it. That control happened to fall into the hands of Dr. Pan, a former naval psychologist who'd set up a practice there, along with a few technological enterprises which had eventually merged into the entity they knew today as Pan Health Sciences Inc.

It was a strange hybrid, and many locals suspected that the whole thing had been a planned operation for many years prior,

though nobody had any evidence. That Pan started producing and distributing television and radio sets, as well as local information terminals (to try and offset the influence of the newspapers for those who preferred to read), was rather convenient for a government program that later happened to want to utilize such devices to tightly control the flow of information in the name of 'securing patriotic sensibilities' and 'minimizing foreign influence on the minds of Americans.' Many thought the technology had basically come down directly out of military research, with all the nefarious ideas one might get regarding ulterior designs such instruments might have, but that too was only supported by suspicion and rumor.

One interesting thing that Kass had noted was, as the sheriff had mentioned, the seeming increase in superstitious thought since she'd been alive. She'd grown up with stories, but people seemed to be *believing* them more than she remembered from when she was young. It was almost imperceptible, having slowly ramped up over time to the point of normalization by the time she'd come of age, except that Kass was quite perceptive. Besides, her own father had seemed to become strangely absorbed in the local folklore in a way that she'd never remembered him being, something which irked her somewhat as it was not something which she found of particular interest.

That must be what's going on with my dreams, she thought to *herself. They may not be getting to me consciously, but they're sneaking in through my sleep.*

"Kass? That okay with you?"

Sheriff Artaud looked at her wearily. Kass shook her head, embarrassed at having zoned out again.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's fine."

Now the sheriff looked concerned.

"Look, I can relay the story to the doc myself if you're not feeling…"

Kass shook her head, standing up and grabbing her jacket off the back of her seat.

"It's okay, sheriff. Let's go."

The drive to Mare Island was quiet except for the group of officers Artaud had sent to check on the scene periodically, reporting via radio to the station. Kass had forgotten about her father when she'd agreed to accompany the sheriff to PHS' headquarters, but had requested he be notified about where she'd gone when he arrived. They made their way over the bridge, a short ten or so minutes, and into the parking lot of their destination. Dr. Henry Pan oversaw his enterprises from there, per his various contracts with the military, and also ran his own private psychology practice from the same location. Kass had never come to see him herself, but the man was well-known throughout Halamar, and she'd heard much about him.

As soon as they stepped out of the cruiser, they were greeted by a slender man in a white lab coat with short, jet-black hair that had streaks of grey, which were awfully reminiscent of lightning—Kass thought it was the slight wave of his natural hair, which it seemed he'd unsuccessfully attempted to reign in with some or another hair product. He wore a smooth, charming smile with no warmth behind it whatsoever, but which was nonetheless somehow captivating.

"Sheriff," he said casually, reaching out a hand to shake the other's, who merely looked at it as though he'd just been given an offensive gesture.

"Yes, uh…" said Artaud, stiffening and becoming very businesslike. "Dr. Pan, this is Kass Scott, the woman who reported tonight's events."

"Miss Scott, pleased to meet you," said Pan, gesturing for them to head inside. "Please, follow me."

They walked in through the heavy glass doors and were greeted by the man's secretary.

"Hello," said the woman, a rather petite woman with curly brown hair and a sweet, almost saintly demeanor.

"This is Ellis," said Pan, walking past her and down a long hallway to the left. "We'll be in my office if you need me."

"Hi," said Kass as she passed.

The woman smiled sweetly at her, and soon she and Artaud were standing with Pan in a large, dim room. The atmosphere was quite comfortable, which was to be expected considering he did therapy out of there, with wooden panels lining the walls and a massive oak table lining one side of the room. There was a large, red, cushioned chair in front of it, contrasting the plain wooden one which Pan now took a seat at, and Kass found herself enamored by all the books and paintings which filled the place up.

"So, what is it you saw, Miss Scott?"

"Huh?" said Kass, snapping her head back in Pan's direction.

"Ahem… your story," said Sheriff Artaud, gently.

"Oh…" said Kass, and she relayed all she had seen once again, at the end of which she felt absolutely ready to collapse.

"Take a seat, dear, you look pale," said Pan, standing up and walking over to a water cooler, where he poured some into a plastic cup and handed it to Kass. "Now it seems like a rather traumatic experience you had… I think we can safely gloss over some of the more exotic elements…"

There was a crackling coming from Artaud's radio, and the voice of a petrified-sounding officer came over to relay an update.

"Sheriff, do you read? Over."

"Copy," said Artaud, "What's going on?"

"Sheriff, they're all gone. Andy, Pete… Something… something came out of the sky."

Artaud's eyes met Pan's briefly as he tried to process what he'd just heard.

"Alright, slow down, Kirt. Say that again."

"We found the boat… and the blood. Suddenly Pete's gone, and we're looking for him, and he comes falling to the ground all carved up. That's when it… something came down and took Andy. Took him right up off his feet."

"Kirt, what the hell are you talking about? Where are you?"

"Shhh… I hear something…"

Another crackle, and then silence.

"Kirt, come in. *Kirt*, are you there? Over."

More silence.

Artaud slammed his radio down on the table and pointed a finger at Dr. Pan.

"Listen, I was willing to go along with your little damage control story based on what the girl told us, but you just heard the same thing I did," he said, his anger rising. "I don't know what this is about, but I know it has to do with *you* and what you've been doing to this town."

"And what is that?" Pan asked calmly.

"I don't know. Nobody does, but ever since you and your people took charge around here…"

"You know the deal, same as I do, sheriff," said Pan. "I'm doing nothing but practicing psychology and doing my civic duty to help keep the peace in the homeland."

"The hell you are!" shouted Artaud. "Your little psychology practice is a mess. What about that boy, huh? The one who went on a rampage, and under your watch!"

"Klein was troubled. I did what I could to help him, but I'm not all-powerful. Not everyone can be treated out of their violent impulses."

"That boy's mother said that he wasn't violent until he started to see *you*!" said the sheriff, but Pan raised his hand.

"We're not going through this again, Artaud. I know you're no fan of what I do here, but that is immaterial to the situation at hand. Now, I'm not going to put out some report about monsters and cannibalism and get the town all out of sorts. If you don't like it, you're welcome to leave, but I'm going to

do what I was tasked to do and make sure this town gets information that is going to help manage any potential panic tonight's events might cause."

Sheriff Artaud glared at Dr. Pan until the latter spoke again.

"Let me do my job. If I am not mistaken, you have one to do yourself."

Artaud looked down at his radio, swiped it from the table, and looked at Kass.

"I'm going to be heading out to the site with backup. I can send someone to retrieve you, or I can pass the word along to your father to come get you here."

"I'd like to see my father," said Kass.

Artaud's demeanor softened a little at her frail voice, and he nodded.

"Okay," he said, patting her on the shoulder. "You've been through a lot. Hang in there."

Kass nodded, and he looked up at Pan.

"We're not finished," he said, storming out.

There was silence in the room, with Dr. Pan closing his eyes for a bit to gather himself. There they were, sitting in the doctor-patient configuration, as if they were about to begin a session.

"Who… who is Klein?" Kass asked gently.

Pan opened his eyes. There was no anxiety in them, despite what one might expect based on the seemingly troubling subject matter which her question revolved around. He seemed empty of all emotion, merely computing his answer as he leaned back in his chair.

"He was an old patient of mine. Probably about your age last time I saw him."

"What happened to him?"

Pan stood up and walked over to a filing cabinet, thumbing through records and retrieving a folder, which he brought over to the table.

"I can't discuss confidential information about our sessions, but seeing as this was a high-profile case, I've collected some details about the public events involving him."

He passed the folder to Kass, and she opened it to find it full of newspaper clippings, the topmost one featuring a series of grizzly photos of men who had presumably been murdered.

"Your patient did this?" asked Kass, sifting through a few more of more or less the same character.

"Indeed. The Halamar Husband-Killer, they called him."

Kass looked up.

"Husband-killer?"

Pan took a deep breath, then spoke.

"Klein was deeply troubled at his own lack of a father, a fixation which often came up in our sessions… please understand this is a matter of public record… over time, he began to express homicidal ideations regarding young families he saw in the city."

Kass took a shaky breath.

"He wanted to kill families?"

Pan shook his head.

"Not the families. Just the fathers. Klein was angry, so angry at his own paternal void that he felt others ought to be deprived as he had. Toward the end of our time together, his hostility had seemed to be going into remission. That is, until he committed a string of murders—and vanished."

"These men were fathers?"

"All new fathers, yes. It seems that somewhere along the line Klein began to stake out his targets, observing the environment for potential victims. Watched them, their patterns… figured out when he might get the best opportunities to strike. And strike he did. Over the course of three evenings roughly twenty years ago, he began his 'rampage,' as sheriff Artaud put it. After the second occurrence, and his failure to show up to a session, I felt it was my duty to notify Halamar P.D. of my suspicions that it very well could have been him. He was nowhere to be found by that time, and he didn't return to his apartment any time after

the police had been notified. He killed again, and that was the last anyone ever saw or heard of him again. That is…"

Pan went silent. He shifted slightly in his seat, appearing to feel as if he'd said too much, giving Kass a look that all but gave it away.

"What?" ventured Kass.

Pan stared at her, seeming to be trying to decide whether or not to divulge more.

"The people of this town… they haven't seemed to notice, but there has been a noted uptick in disappearances in the years since Klein disappeared. The profile of the missing persons is consistent with Klein's target of choice—young men who have recently become fathers."

Kass' stomach turned a little. She was the one shifting nervously in her own seat now, unsure of whether she wanted to know any more.

"Are you suggesting…" she started, but Pan nodded in confirmation before she could finish the question.

"We have agreed to try and not make a fuss about it… Sheriff Artaud and the Halamar police department are more or less unwilling to entertain the notion that Klein is still out there somewhere, picking off victims… but I'm not so sure."

"How could he pull that off?" Kass asked. "Where would he…"

The image of the old abandoned resort flashed into her mind.

"Could the killer we encountered tonight have been Klein?"

Pan took a deep breath and thought.

"If it is, we are going to have to be very careful about how we go about dealing with him. If he has indeed been active all these years, he's clearly very careful about it. Considering that whoever's out there just took out three police officers, I think that's more than fair to say at this point. That's why what we put out in the media regarding all this is so important to get right…"

A noise came from down the hall, followed by a scream. They both looked toward the door, Pan getting up to open it.

"Ellis?" he called out, receiving no answer.

He walked out through the door now, Kass tentatively following behind. She felt he'd have told her to stay if he wasn't so preoccupied with the emergent situation, but she took advantage of his distractedness anyway, following him down the hall until they emerged into the lobby.

"Ellis?" Pan repeated, gazing over at his secretary, who was slouched over in her chair in an unnatural position. The lights had gone out, and it was somewhat difficult to make out what they were seeing before them, but there was a strange wet noise coming from her direction and she seemed to be twitching in violent fits.

"Ellis?" Pan said once more, and suddenly she went very still.

Out from behind her a figure rose, pushing Ellis' rolling chair around as he did so to reveal what Kass could barely make out as a lifeless woman who seemed to be bleeding profusely from what looked to be the rough area of her ear. As Kass' eyes adjusted she could make out a man standing there, blood dripping off his chin, and she realized with shock that he wore the same fisherman's smock and hat as the man she'd encountered earlier—and that this was he.

"Run," said Dr. Pan, pushing Kass behind him as the man began to make his way in their direction.

She didn't hesitate, taking off back toward the office as the doctor called after her.

"Lock the door! Take the back exit and get to Pan Hospital. You'll be safe there."

III

"What's wrong, dear?" asked one of the receptionists when Kass had arrived at Pan Hospital.

What was wrong, mostly, was that she was now worrying about her father showing up at Dr. Pan's office and being confronted by the man who appeared to be pursuing her. She didn't know what Pan had intended to do, but she did have doubts as to whether she'd be able to stop him.

"Dr. Pan sent me," said Kass, trying to catch her breath. She was beginning to go into something of a panic attack by now, which the receptionist seemed to catch onto, as she indicated that she should sit down.

"Relax. Breathe," said the woman, trying to comfort her. "What's happened?"

"That… *thing*… it killed those police, and it's chasing me."

"Kass?" said a voice from behind her.

She turned around to see a face that made her feel both a sense of relief and a little bit sick.

"Isaac," she said, her breath beginning to slow. She looked back at the receptionist. "He's coming. Pan told me to come here, that I'd be safe here."

"You said someone's after you?" asked the receptionist, reading the answer in Kass' eyes and looking up at some of the other staff. One of them met her eyes briefly, nodded, and then left the room.

"It's alright. I'll get you some water, just relax," said the woman, leaving the room herself.

Most of the room seemed rather undisturbed by the commotion, one man coughing in a manner which suggested that he was calm despite whatever he was here for. Kass and Isaac sat in awkward silence for a few moments until the latter spoke.

"Are you okay?"

Kass nodded, sniffing as her breath evened out.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, not feeling quite ready to speak with him again, but figuring she might as well lean into it since fate had put them together now.

"My mother," said Isaac, looking around the corner, down the hall where she'd presumably been taken. "She'd been dealing with some health problems for a while. Thought we ought to get her checked out tonight as she wasn't feeling too well. What about you? Why'd you come in like that?"

"I…" she started, hesitating as she thought that she'd rather not mention her date with Hans with the father of her child. "I've had a long night."

"Yeah? What happened?"

She relayed the story, leaving out the bits involving her ex-lover's competition. She didn't know why she cared, considering the gravity of the situation as well as the fact that the two of them hadn't talked in some time. Suddenly the room flashed red, startling everyone as thick metal reinforcements came out from the ceiling to cover the doors and windows.

"Don't be alarmed," said a voice over the intercom. "We are entering a state of lockdown. This is a simple matter of protocol. Please stay in place until the lockdown is lifted."

They both looked around, noticing the receptionist coming around the corner with a doctor.

"Excuse me, ma'am?" said the man, gesturing to Kass. "Would you please come with us?"

"Sure," said Kass, looking back at Isaac, who stood up as well.

"I'm coming with you," he said, with no protest from any of the staff.

Kass looked at him, feeling a mixture of sympathy and a longing to have him by her side.

"Isaac…"

"Please," said the doctor, "this is an urgent situation."

Kass bit her lip, deciding to let Isaac follow her into a nearby room with the staff. The two sat down as the others huddled around them, looks of worry on their faces.

"Dr. Pan sent word about what's happened tonight," said the doctor. "He put us on lockdown, told us to activate the full

security potential of this place… he got away from whoever is chasing you, but he… we don't know where he's going."

"What do you mean?" asked Kass.

"He said he has some business to attend to, and he's put me in charge of Pan Health Sciences for the foreseeable future… it seems he's going to be disappearing for a while."

Kass thought this was strange, but she wasn't sure why they were telling her this.

"Do you have a plan?"

The doctor looked fearful, unsure of himself.

"Dr. Pan said the man in question is very dangerous and poses a grave threat to the hospital… that it is unlikely we will be able to thwart him for very long. I'm just having a hard time understanding… this place is locked down airtight. What is it that makes this man so dangerous?"

"I don't know," said Kass. "I don't know that much more than you do. I know he's killed people. I think… I think he's been eating them…"

She wanted to relay some of the more fantastical attributes she'd been able to pick up regarding him so far, but figured it wasn't worth trying to explain.

"He seemed… frightened," said the doctor. "Like he saw something he wasn't expecting."

Kass took a deep breath.

"The killer is… unusual," she said, to a room of silence.

The two hospital staff members looked at each other. There was a commotion coming from the main lobby, and they both headed out to see what was going on, with Kass and Isaac following behind them. There was blood all over the lobby, with the bodies of the remaining staff lying dead, and the patients huddling in fear against the walls.

"What happened?" asked the doctor, wide-eyed, taking a step out of the hall.

Nobody answered, but the doctor turned left, then right, when the trident Kass had seen used in the killing of the ranger pierced his torso. The room screamed, and the receptionist turned around to face Kass and Isaac.

"Take the stairs to the roof. Hide up there," she said, pushing them behind her.

"My mom!" exclaimed Isaac.

"I'll find and stay with her. Go!"

They ran up the stairs and emerged out on top of the building, several stories up. They looked at each other, and Kass realized how long it had been since they'd been alone with each other. She'd hoped to never have to have this moment with Isaac, although now that it had been forced upon her, she felt a sense of guilt about it. Something in his eyes gave it away that he was thinking along the same lines as he was, and she went up close to the ledge of the building and sat down, where she was joined by Isaac.

"So… what happened between you and me?" he asked after some silence, the drama below them seeming to vanish momentarily.

Kass didn't have an answer for him. Part of her was angry at him for the pregnancy, while another part was simply terrified at its implications. How could she just give up the best years of her life to this circumstance? Why couldn't she bring herself to do what many her age were beginning to do around that time, and have the fetus removed?

"I'm just not ready for all this," she said quietly, her voice quivering.

"I'm not either," said Isaac. His voice wasn't comforting or otherwise charged with anything except a direct, honest energy which relayed to her that he merely intended to stand beside her at this moment. She appreciated that, a quality about his character that she'd forgotten she liked. "I know you're scared, but you don't have to do this alone. I'm here however you need me to be, even in the event that you want me to be absent. I can do that too. It's your choice."

Kass had begun to cry, and she wiped her tears with the sleeve of her jacket. This is exactly what she'd wanted to avoid. This was not how her father had raised her, and she

felt great shame at being weak, being vulnerable. It had been him and her since her mother had died, and she'd learned to be strong and carry both herself and him on days and nights when the grief had been too much for him. Even before then, when the chaotic lifestyle her mother had led all her life had begun to take its toll, when the mystery cocktails of drugs and alcohol she regularly indulged in had started to take her mind even before they took her body. It had been too much for both of them, but she and her father had held tightly together, and when he'd finally begun to recover he'd taught her how to be even tougher than life had already forced her to be. These tears, this heartache —they were not her.

Or were they? She couldn't remember crying, losing it like her father had. Perhaps she'd learned how to hold a stoic countenance in all the years of her childhood, in her mother's emotional neglect —even, at times, abuse—and her father's absence in how wrapped up he'd been with her. All this hit her like a tidal wave, had an antiquated air about it, as if she were finally feeling all that emotion that had been suppressed for years and years.

"You're the toughest girl I know, Kass," said Isaac, placing a hand on her knee. "Whatever's going on inside you, I know you can work through it and come out strong."

Kass laughed, half-laugh, half-sob, hot tears rolling in between the corners of her mouth.

"I'm sorry…" she said. "For disappearing like that."

Isaac said nothing, but squeezed her knee and gave her a look of understanding.

"After all this… if we make it out alive… I'd like to give it another chance…"

The door burst open to reveal the man who'd chased her all the way from Tate Bay, still donning his smock and fisherman's hat, now rich with fresh blood. She could see him clearer than ever now, although the sun had not yet risen, in the full moon and a blinking red light coming from somewhere above them. The man smiled, his large, sharp yellow teeth glistening too with blood. Somehow his skin seemed to match the silver of the moon, but there now seemed to be something of a green 'aura' surrounding him, something she could never be sure thereafter whether she'd imagined or not. The man lunged at them, and Isaac stood up to defend her, but it wasn't much of a fight at all. Like everyone else who had stood in his way, he met with the three prongs of the trident that the man had used to kill all night, ripping it from Isaac's body and leaving him to die on the roof as he approached Kass.

He did not attack her, but merely stood over her, and suddenly she found herself in her dream, sitting in the passenger seat of her father's car as the man approached her from her right side. She sensed a new, emotional aura coming from the man, whom she'd half considered a literal monster.

Leviathan. The nightmare of Halamar. The specter that had haunted Mneuland County.

The man kneeled down beside her, reaching out a hand—a pale, rough-looking hand, but the first thing about him that Kass thought had looked human—and placed it on her belly. To her astonishment, he spoke.

"They have plans for this generation of Halamar's children," he said in a voice that was much gentler and sensitive than she could have ever expected. "I am what they made me. I do what they needed me to do, by warping me the same way that they've warped the minds of you people to think about me."

She looked up at him, and saw a man. An ordinary man, with none of the monstrosity she'd thought she'd seen before, although he did have a somewhat deranged look about him. He continued.

"You should leave this town. Get as far away from Pan Health Sciences as you can. Your baby is not safe while it remains here."

"I can't leave Halamar… this is my home. It's all I know," said Kass, her

sensation of passivity beginning to subtly morph, changing into something else that wasn't yet quite apparent.

"You *must* leave. It's not just about the child, but what they plan to make of it. The danger to Halamar and beyond will be infinitely greater if you stay here any longer," said the man, more firmly this time, seeming to grow somewhat agitated.

"We are safe here," said Kass, although she acknowledged to herself that given the situation that was clearly not true. "I will stay in Halamar."

The man grew visibly angry, standing up and towering over her in the menacing fashion she was by now familiar with. Her hand gripped tightly around the knife she still had hidden, while he flung his trident aside and brandished a much larger one of his own.

"Your child will pose nothing but danger if it stays here… and if you will not remove it from this place, I will remove it from you."

All at once, millions of years of maternal instinct arose in her, her heart rate rising to such a pitch that it could be a hurricane, a force of nature itself, ready to defend the new life growing inside her to her last breath. The man sensed the fight rising in her, and his monstrous features seemed to return, his lips curling back into a hiss that resembled the aggressive stance of a territorial, feral cat. She readied herself for the fight, preparing to rise to her feet, but suddenly there appeared in the man's torso the outline of three large prongs. Kass hadn't noticed it before, but the woman who'd sent them up there had snuck up behind him and pierced him with his own discarded trident. He fell forward, the prongs leaving his body as he attempted to use his remaining life energy to finish the job he had in mind, but Kass rolled out of the way just in time to see him swipe at her, stumble, and fly off the ledge of the building. Moments later, a loud *thud* was heard as he made contact with the ground.

⚓ ⚓ ⚓

Kass sat wrapped in a blanket next to her father, having just finished giving details of what had happened since Sheriff Artaud and she had parted earlier in the morning. The sun was rising now, with the sky a beautiful shade of blue-pink. The PHS hospital staff had waited until the police had arrived to lift the lockdown, and her father had accompanied them to the hospital after finding the PHS HQ in disarray and returning to the Halamar police station to report it. Artaud had gone with another group to check on the first that had been sent out, finding their mangled bodies stringing the path to the abandoned resort. They had investigated the resort itself as well, something which had evidently never been done, and discovered a deep underground complex that was consistent with the legends, appearing to have been used for some kind of medical experimentation. They had decided to be straightforward with the public in Dr. Pan's absence, taking advantage of the power vacuum while the company internally reorganized in an effort to replace him.

Nothing but a trail of blood had been found leading to the nearby bay, prompting a search that had yet to yield any findings. Much like Klein had disappeared all those years ago after his string of murders, it seemed as if he had done it once again, although most seemed to agree he was unlikely to survive his wounds for very long. Halamar might be lit with chatter about the legendary Leviathan they so feared, but it would no doubt be of some comfort that it was probably dead, killed by its own weapon. Mysteriously, the trident itself had vanished as well, though Kass was sure that he hadn't had it as he'd gone tumbling over the hospital ledge.

"Are you alright?" asked her father, looking concernedly at her.

Kass nodded.

"Yeah, I'm alright."

"I'm sorry it took so long for me to get to you…" said her father, "…and I'm sorry about Isaac. He was a good kid."

Kass said nothing, as she considered the open wound his death had left in her heart, and the relationship they'd never get a chance to rekindle. Her child would be fatherless, and there was now no possibility of ever changing that save for a surrogate. She raged at herself for abandoning him, and she wondered if all this could have been avoided if she'd just stuck with him so that they could've figured it out together.

"It's not your fault," her father said. "Sometimes we just… lose people. You know that as well as I do. It's a part of life. Natural as anything."

Yeah, Kass thought to herself, her old, guarded self beginning to reform within.

She would take on this responsibility. She'd be strong for the baby, as she had been for her dad, and do whatever she had to do to make sure she could provide a good life.

But what was that Leviathan… Klein *had said about…*

She looked up at her dad.

"Have you ever thought about leaving Halamar?"

He shook his head.

"No. Never. Would never want to… why?"

Kass did not answer, but simply gazed out over the bay, which mirrored the sunrise across its murky, mysterious surface.

Epilogue

Dr. Henry Pan had followed his orders as they'd been given, having fled his post at Halamar to a nuclear submarine off the coast of California. He entered through a narrow hatch after it had surfaced, walking down its maze-like hallways with nothing but dim red lights to find his way until he was greeted by two men in spiffy black military uniforms. They said nothing, but merely led him to a wide conference room where a man sat at the end of a large tabular ring in front of a map which was projected onto a screen, a map of the United States of America with red lights scattered all across except in one place, which was lit green—roughly the location of Halamar, California.

"Good morning, doctor," said the man.

"General," said Pan, taking the seat directly across from him, all the way at the other end of the table.

"So pleased to see you—but please tell me, we received your signal… you came off as rather distressed. Can you explain that to me?"

Pan shuddered.

"It was… I saw… it didn't look human."

General Murray smiled, a wicked, humorless smile that revealed his perfect white teeth.

"It was," said Murray, his smile vanishing in an instant. "Well, in form anyway. Not sure there was much humanity left in that poor boy's soul."

"Poor boy… that was not Klein," started Pan, Murray raising his palm to stop him.

"It was," he said again. "Do you not remember the suggestions you let out upon the residents of that town? Years of subtle, subliminal broadcasting that were intended to convince them that their *Leviathan* was a real monster?"

"Of course," said Pan nervously. "They'd remember their encounters with Klein as monstrous, possibly even perceive him that way. Attribute all sorts of fantastical abilities to him which they never actually saw."

"Exactly," said Murray flatly, staring, waiting for Pan's response.

"But… I *did* see it… I wasn't supposed to be…"

Murray smiled again, and Pan continued after a brief pause.

"… you altered *my* perception?"

Murray nodded.

"Why?"

The general took a deep breath, as if he were bored with the conversation, as if the fact that they had violated Pan's mind was no matter at all.

"Simple protocol, doctor. Some things, even you must be kept in the dark about."

Pan shook his head.

"I don't understand… so it *was* Klein that I saw?"

"A version of him, yes. A version that would be sure to send your frightened little ass running right back to us, where we need you now."

Pan considered this.

"Care to fill me in on phase two of the operation?" he tried, looking sideways at Murray.

"Certainly. You've earned that privilege, I suppose," said the general, standing up and turning his back to Pan as he looked at the map.

"Are you familiar with the book of Exodus, Dr. Pan? How it starts?"

"Yes," said Pan. "A new king takes power in Egypt… enslaves the Israelites… decrees that all the male babies are killed."

"Very good," said general Murray sharply. "We take our inspiration there, but with a twist—that the children shall not *die*, but *live*."

"How is that useful to our aims?" asked Pan.

"There are many undercover operatives embedded within your organization, Dr. Pan, who will dutifully carry out your legacy, in your name, to serve a higher us. They have provisions in place to ensure that… *adjustments*… are made to the children, even in utero, and thereafter. Adjustments suitable to our purposes."

"Ah," said Pan, grinning, great pride arising in the work he'd done as its usefulness became clear. "Hence the removal of Halamar's paternal influence over a generation."

Murray turned around, smiling wider than ever, and sat again.

"Indeed. A void we intend to fill with influences of our own."

The room grew quiet, the elation of a successful long-range mission fulfilled leaving both men feeling satisfied, almost as gods. Pan leaned over the narrow edge of the circular table, out through a glass opening looking down onto the colossal statue of a man in the classical Greek style, gripping an enlarged neuron which bore a resemblance to a bolt—or bundle—of lightning. Murray spoke again, and Pan leaned back again to sit firmly in his chair.

"The human being is a complex animal, prone to defiance and rebellion. A pesky little feature of millions of years of evolutionary resolve. The rulers of men have always sought means of constraining that impulse, and countless times have failed in their efforts. As they deserved to. Their pathetic attempts at control were always liable to greatly offend the natural human tendency to seek liberty. As you know, we now have means of coercion which provide us with the ability to bypass people's very perception of being controlled, a highly delicate process which now for the first time seems to promise a real possibility of just barely containing the complexity of human beings at every level."

"I never really did look past my own psychological work," said Pan, for the first time in a long time feeling a little dumb. "I suppose you've orchestrated quite the array of experts to attack this problem in tandem."

"We have," said Murray, pressing a button on his end of the desk to reveal a flag design featuring seven black-and-white stripes and ten red stars on its foreground. "The best from around the world representing the New Order of Babylon."

STRIKING SILVER

Striking Silver (Part I)

1

Another sickening splash as I emptied the contents of my stomach into the toilet. At this point, I wasn't even sure what I was ejecting. I hadn't eaten since the previous afternoon. My mind went to the sole memory I had somehow retained since blacking out last night at *The Perelandra,* already hunched over in a stall, listening to Leo complain about how I had left with that strange veiled woman, and how the strip bar was now closing.

…who were those people you can in with?

…why were they all wearing that same sort of veil?

The shards of memory squirted into my head, as bile now dribbled out of it. I sat up, still feeling nauseous, but with a bit more calm of a stomach. I waited for more memories to come through from the night before, pulling myself back and leaning against a wall.

Lucky? Are you alright in there? Lucky? Lucky Yu?

I grasped the small, silver, insertable vibrator I'd found in the blue denim jacket I'd woken up in, presumably belonging to the mysterious woman I'd spent the night with. A rather intimate sexual item. Guess that meant maybe I'd scored or something.

Lucky me, I thought to myself. Too bad I couldn't remember that.

It was a wonder how fine I felt when I'd woken up. I had a special ritual to try and reduce hangovers that typically worked pretty well, one I'm sure I'd employed the previous night, but I'd awoken feeling pristine. It had been the first round of chemo I'd undergone earlier in the day that now had me reeling in agony. As awful as it was, what really got me was the notion of having to forgo my weekly outings at *The Perelandra* with the boys. I didn't know how long it would be, didn't really even bother with the type of cancer I had or any of the specifics. Just wanted it to be over as soon as possible so I could get back to my life. I didn't quite track the days of sickness before I was up and ready to move around again, but as soon as the first opportunity presented itself I took it.

The doctors told me I was unlikely to survive my illness, information which almost led me to decline treatment altogether, until my friends rallied around and convinced me to go through with it. They were good in that way, informing me of how vital I was to the group and how it wouldn't be the same if I went off and died on them. That was almost enough for me, but the idea of never seeing my beloved dancers again was what ultimately convinced me to go ahead and give it a shot. Of course, that meant short-term deprivation and suffering, but I wagered I'd be worth it if I could ultimately resume our visits. My treatment team had advised against further outings until treatment was finished, and so I had decided to replace the girls and the club with one of our town's local coffee shop, where I now sat, watching a barista scrub a counter in front of me. She had the makings of a good dancer, I thought, and I considered suggesting it to her until Leo strolled in from the street, came in, and took a seat beside me.

"How's it going, buddy?" he asked, whistling and raising his hand to get the attention of the girl just ahead. "Can I get a coffee? Black. No sugar. Thanks."

She seemed ready to protest, which I thought reasonable since she was obviously not taking orders at this particular time, but Leo gave her no opportunity to do so.

"Good place to write a memoir," he said, his characteristic good cheer immediately infecting me, and seemingly even the barista, who paused, then turned and headed toward the counter.

"Not dead yet," I muttered, sipping my own coffee, bitter as I'd felt before Leo had showed up.

"I know," said Leo grinning. "That's what a memoir is for, for when you *are*. Which could be any day now!"

I mock laughed.

"That's for old guys. I'm barely twenty-seven. What the hell am I gonna write about?"

Leo thought for a moment, thanking the barista when she came with his order, handing her a massive stack of one dollar bills and telling her to keep the change.

"Well, if you don't wanna write about yourself, how about the Perelandra? That old joint deserves its story told, and you know it's got the history for it," he said, taking a sip.

I hesitated at that, and for a moment I thought that spending the rest of my days writing a history of *The Perelandra* might actually be something worth doing.

"So really… how you feeling?" Leo asked, his eyes taking on a sincerity rarely witnessed.

"Like shit," I said. "But better than the last few days. Chemo is really kicking my ass."

Leo chuckled.

"Actually, it's kicking the *cancer's* ass," he said matter-of-factly. "You're just in the way."

I shrugged.

"Guess so."

"So you ever gonna tell me who that girl was?" Leo asked, elbowing me in the rib.

"I told you, I have no idea," I said. "I don't even remember seeing her in the first place."

"Dude, I don't think you were wasted, I think someone drugged you."

I looked at him.

"That's definitely not normal," he added, defying the look I was trying as hard as I could to give him to imply that he was crazy.

"Why would she do that?" I asked, shaking my head. "It doesn't make any sense."

"I never said *she*, I said *someone*," answered Leo. "All those people you were with at the end of the night… maybe they're a cult or something. Some kind of *Rosemary's Baby* shit, where they need you for something, but you can't know."

"What on earth could they need me for? I'm not a woman. I can't even have a baby."

"Just an example. Who says it's a baby?"

I sighed.

"Great, Leo. Totally making me feel great," I said, somewhat lightheartedly, and he relented a little.

"Hey, man, I'm just kidding… but also looking out for you. Let me know if you want me to stop you going with them next time. Lucky Lucky has someone around to notice."

We left the coffee shop and strolled a way down Main Street. It was a quiet day, though most of the little shops, bars, and restaurants all seemed fairly busy.

"Hey, check out what that girl left with me," I said, pulling out the egg-shaped device.

"What is it?" asked Leo, taking the thing and examining it.

"Some kind of insertable sex toy, I think. Like a vibrator… right?"

He turned it over in his hand for a moment, then shrugged.

"I don't know man. They're classically silver, like this thing is, but the ones with this shape are usually made of silicone."

He handed it back to me, and I gave it another look over myself. There were three buttons on the smaller end, and I decided to try and push one to see what would happen. Nothing.

Maybe the batteries are dead, I thought to myself, though I saw no place to for batteries, or a charging port.

Weird.

We strolled up and down Main for a little while, finally deciding to head back to

the coffee shop where we would depart from each other. As we were heading there, a curious thing happened. I first saw it out of the corner of my eye—a red Miniature English Bull Terrier, on the other side of the street, began yelping and trying to cross. Given that traffic had been beginning to pick up just then, the dog found that rather difficult, though he seemed to comprehend the danger and showed some caution in the process. Eventually, he just bolted, causing a driver on our side of the street to slam on his brakes and honk, though the dog seemed not to really notice. Instead, once he'd gotten over to our side, he walked right up to me and jumped up.

"Hey!" I said, laughing and kneeling. "Whose dog are you?"

The dog had no collar, and looking around, I could find no indication of an owner anywhere. He did his best to lick my face, and sat wagging his tail, looking up at me, once I stood back up.

"Seems to like you," said Leo. "Guess he's yours now."

"No way," I said, looking regretfully at the dog. "I'm retarded. He's kinda retarded. The thing'll be dead in a week with me."

"You're telling me you wouldn't voluntarily and happily die at the feet of Pegysus?" asked Leo, referring to one of *The Perelandra's* particularly hot dancers. I laughed.

"Not remotely the same thing."

"Totally the same thing. That thing is adoration… or, loyalty"

We both looked back as we walked, the thing following us, looking up at me hopefully. Opening the doors to the coffee shop again, I gently tried to keep the dog out as we entered, but the little bastard was determined, and didn't even seem to really register my commands.

"There's no dogs allowed in here," said the barista, still cleaning the exact same table.

I shrugged.

"It's not our dog."

She looked confusedly at the thing, which stayed close to me as we sat down.

"Hey! Out!" she said, trying to get the dog's attention, which he completely and utterly ignored, not even looking at her until she began waving her arms. Still, having noticed she was trying to communicate something to him, he lay there next to me, tongue out as he panted heavily.

The woman grabbed a nearby broom and began to approach, which made the dog seem to panic a little, standing up slightly and looking at me for support.

"Hey, uh…" I said shielding him a little bit. "Maybe… I can try to persuade him. Don't scare him like that."

She looked at me as if to tell me to shut the fuck up, but something in her demeanor shifted as we made eye contact. It was strange—she'd seen me several times now, and heretofore hadn't shown the slightest hint that she recognized that I was even a person. As a matter of fact, I was somewhat surprised she hadn't tried chasing *me* out with a broom… but now, as she looked at me, she seemed somehow astonished, absolutely dumbfounded.

"I…" she said, shifting her weight onto one hip and beginning to twirl her hair. "No, he's fine…"

"Elva, there's no dogs allowed in here," said the woman behind the counter, looking over at the scene and crossing her arms.

Elva rolled her eyes and smiled at me, going back to her work, but now seeming to be subtly trying to accentuate her form as she moved, looking back at me occasionally and smiling some more.

"Looks like maybe you don't need the Perelandra after all," said Leo, chuckling.

Well, later I found myself struggling to throw off the Bull Terrier, who seemed absolutely insistent on staying with me. Camping himself out in my yard, I collected a few expiring items from the fridge and threw them out for him, along with a bowl of water.

"Stupid dog," I said, looking out through the window at the dog, who looked happy as could be just being near my house.

I lingered with the curtains open, curious as to what on earth had gotten into this thing. Why *me*? As I pondered I watched him turn around and face the gate opening, as if he were guarding the place. I began to feel bad, and decided to let him in.

"Hey!" I said, opening the front door and calling to him.

No response.

"*Hey*!" I said, a little louder, this time clapping.

Still nothing.

I looked around and saw an old Campbell's soup can lying around, so I picked it up and threw it at his head. He whirled around, looking startled at first, but wagging his tail furiously as he saw me.

"C'mon!" I said, stepping aside and waving him in, a gesture he seemed to get instantly.

He was like a tornado through the place, unable to contain his excitement, jumping up and licking me as I sat down on the couch.

"Stubborn guy, you are," I said. "Think that's what I'll call you. Stubborn. Stubborn… Pete."

Eventually we'd settled down, I turning on the tube and mindlessly twirling the little vibrator-egg thing around in my pocket until I realized what I was doing. Taking it out, I thought of cancer and felt dread at the thought of undergoing another round of chemo. I pressed the same button I had earlier just to make sure nothing would happen, which nothing did.

Maybe the other button… I thought to myself, trying the one right next to it.

Still no vibrationals.

I sighed, considering looking closely again at the casing to try and find out how the thing received power, but passively chose not to as a slight depression began to fall over me. Despite my declining emotional state, I noted with as much gratitude as I could muster that I was beginning to feel considerably better.